ソードアート・オンライン6

ファントム・バレット

銃と鋼鉄のVRMMO≪ガンゲイル・オンライン≫で発生した≪死銃（デス・ガン）≫事件を調査するため、≪GGO≫へとログインしたキリト。

一見超美少女キャラと見間違えるアバターにコンバートされるトラブルに遭った彼だったが、スナイパーの少女・シノンのナビゲートにより、全ガンナーの頂点たる対人トーナメント≪BoB（バレットオブバレッツ）≫に無事参戦を果たす。

キリトは、銃が支配するこのゲームで唯一≪光剣≫を駆使、≪BoB≫を勝ち進む。その奇抜な戦闘スタイルが話題となり、徐々にゲーム内での知名度は上がっていった。

そして≪BoB≫決勝。数多の強敵がひしめく≪バトルロイヤル≫の中、ついに≪死銃≫が姿を現す。果たして≪死銃≫とは何者なのか。本当に≪仮想世界≫から≪現実世界≫へ影響を及ぼすことができるのか……キリトは単身、≪死銃≫へと挑む!!

『ファントム・バレット』編、完結!!

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ソードアート・オンライン6
ファントム・バレット

川原礫

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かわはら れき
川原 礫

考えてみると、ここ数年関東から出た記憶がない気がするのです。たまには遠くまで行ってみたいなあと思うものの脳内計画を立てる段階でめんどくさくなってしまう私……。よしネトゲで旅行する。

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド1 —黒雪姫の帰還—
アクセル・ワールド2 —紅の暴風姫—
アクセル・ワールド3 —夕闇の略奪者—
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あべしっ！

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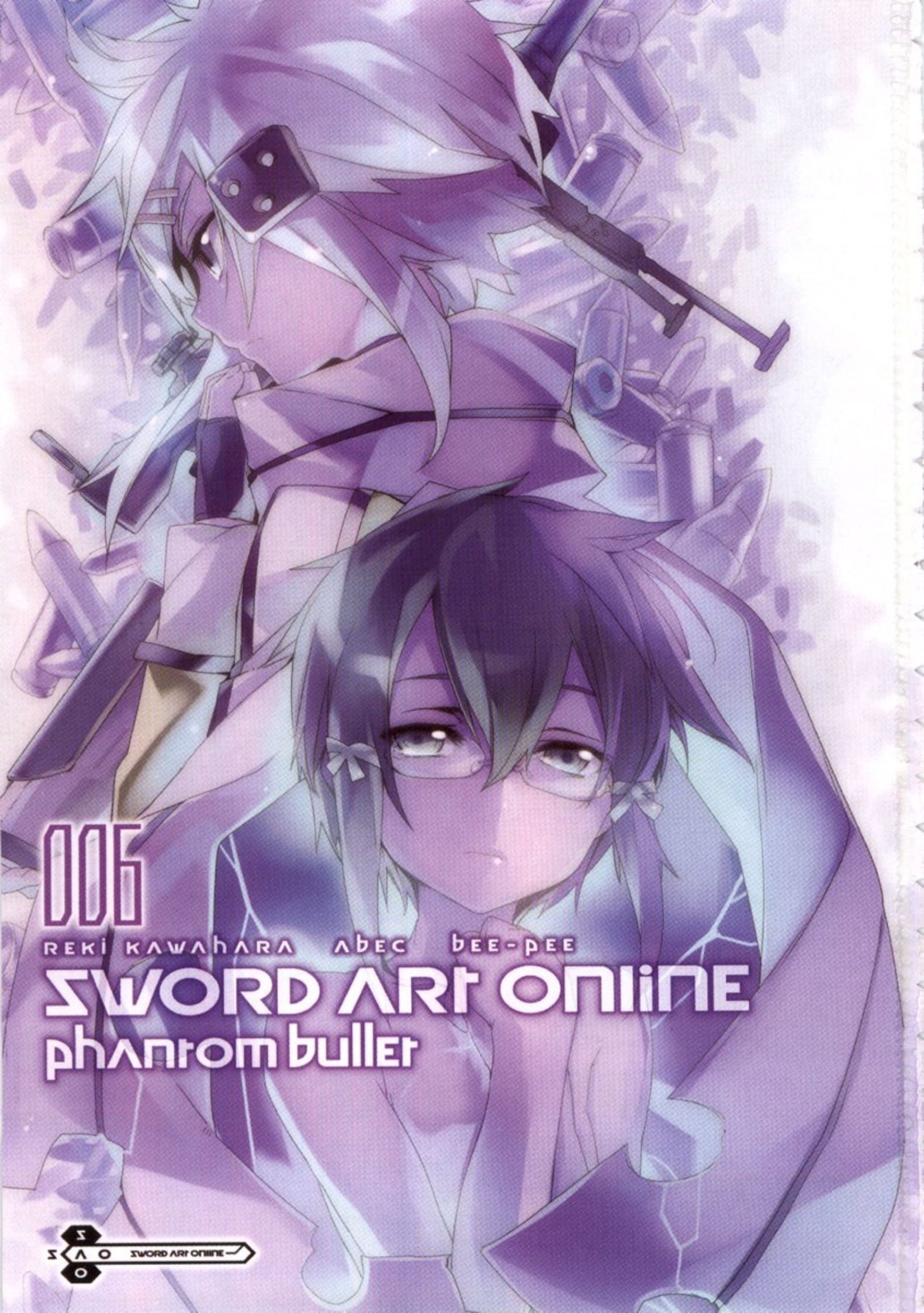

006
REKI KAWAHARA abec bee-pee
SWORD ART ONLINE
phantom bullet

「I AM GOING TO FIGHT AGAINST HIM.....
THIS <<DEATH GUN>>.
I CAN'T LET HIM SHOOT ANYONE
WITH THAT GUN ANY MORE.」
KIRITO
A BOY WHO, IN ORDER TO COME IN CONTACT WITH THE <<DEATH GUN>>, ENTERED <<GGO>>. THE ONLY <<SWORD>> USER WITHIN THE MMO OF GUNS AND STEEL.
「I.....DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE IT.
THERE CAN'T BE A VRMMO PLAYER
WHO DOESN'T PK BUT TRULY KILLS.」
SINON
A FEMALE PLAYER IN THE MMO OF GUNS AND STEEL <<GUN GALE ONLINE>>. A SNIPER WIELDING THE LARGE RIFLE <<HECATE II>>.

「EVEN IF IT IS KIRITO, HE WOULDN'T GO THAT FAR. .....WELL, I DON'T THINK HE WOULD.」
ASUNA § KIRITO'S LOVER. AN UNDINE SORCERESS IN <<ALO>>.
「REALLY.....IT'S A SURPRISE, ISN'T IT? SINCE IT'S ABOUT KIRITO-SAN, I EXPECTED HIM TO GO GUNS-ABLAZE FROM THE START OR SOMETHING.」
SCILICA § A GIRL SAVED BY KIRITO IN <<SAO>>. WITHIN <<ALO>>, SHE TAKES THE FORM OF A CAIT SITH, CAPABLE OF TAMING.
「AHAHA, WELL THAT COULD BE TRUE TOO. PLUS, WITH A SWORD INSTEAD OF A GUN, IN A SHOOTING GAME.」
LIZBETH § THE GIRL WHO CREATED KIRITO'S SWORD IN <<SAO>>. IN <<ALO>>, A LEPRECHAUN BLACKSMITH.
「BROTHER ISN'T SHOWN ON THE SCREEN MUCH--」
LYFA § KIRITO'S SISTER, SUGUHA. IN <<ALO>>, SHE ACTS AS A SYLPH MAGICAL WARRIOR.

SINON
「WHENEVER IT IS, ALWAYS CHECK SIX.」

「――――――――!!」
「YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING.
YOU WILL BE DEFEATED HERE BY ME,
ON THE GROUND HELPLESSLY
AS I KILL THAT GIRL,
WHILE YOU ARE ONLY ABLE TO WATCH.」

The battle royal to decide the strongest in Gun Gale Online

The stage of the 3rd Bullet of Bullets Tournament

«ISL Ragnarok» full map

«ISL Ragnarok»

The solitary island holding the final tournament, «Bullet of Bullets», where the battle to decide the strongest in the gun and steel VRMMO «Gun Gale Online» takes place. A battle royale where the thirty gunners who had climbed up to reach the final engage in a shootout on the same map. The winner is the last one standing.

The battle stage, ISL Ragnarok, is ten kilometers in diameter. It is a composite stage including mountains, forests, and a desert. Each avatar is randomly placed on the map when the battle starts. Each participant is automatically given the item «Satellite Scan Terminal». Every fifteen minutes, every gunner's location on the map, taken from the surveillance satellite, is transmitted to all terminals. In other words, to avoid a surprise attack, the limit one can hide in a single location is fifteen minutes.

At the center is the city ruins, the remains of an advanced civilization long past. The southern part is a river which divides the stage into two parts, there is a metal bridge to cross it. The south eastern part is a forest, the western part is a grassland, the eastern part is rural area, and the northern part is the desert zone. Aside from sandy ground, the desert also has a rocky mountain zone and caves.

Illustrator/ Midori Foo

Chapter 7

"Onii-chan~!"[1]

It was a bright and clear Sunday. I was sitting at the dining table eating my lunch, and I suddenly had an «ominous feeling» rush up between my eyebrows after seeing my beloved imouto giving me her brightest smile. This proves how I, Kirigaya Kazuto, was not a good person.

However, I still stopped myself from putting the cherry tomato into my mouth and said,

"Wha…what's wrong, Sugu?"

Once I finished asking, I saw my imouto—or rather, my cousin, Kirigaya Suguha sitting across me. She picked up something that she had put down on the chair beside her, and at this moment, I immediately knew that my premonition was spot on.

"Erm…did you see this news on the net this morning?"

As she said that, a large A4-sized printing paper was pushed to me. It seemed that she printed the news bulletin of the largest VRMMO gaming info website «MMO Tomorrow», or 'M Tomo' for short.

The headlines had the words 'The list of 30 players taking part in the 3rd «Bullet of Bullets» Royal Rumble for the title of the strongest in 'Gun Gale Online' has been revealed' written in thick font.

Below it, there's also a brief report of the namelist of all the participants.

The finger of Suguha, who cut her fingernails neatly, pointed to a line 'Ranked 1st in Group F: Kirito 'First' ' I glanced at those words and weakly tried to cover things up.

"Heh, heh— so there's someone with a name similar to mine—"

"What do you mean similar? It's completely the same."

Under the bangs, Suguha showed a smile on the clean face befitting that of a sports-girl.

In this world of reality, she could take part in the national High School kendo tournament and the Gyokuryuuki group kendo tournament. Someone weak like me who could only hide at home can't match her

physically. Also, Suguha's controlling the fairy swordsman «Lyfa» in this completely technical VRMMO «ALfheim Online». Those proper and sturdy sword techniques far surpass my sword skills where I merely swung my sword wildly.

No matter whether it's the real world or virtual world, I could only apologize immediately once I get into an argument with Suguha, but normally, I wouldn't need to worry about that. That's because during the past year ever since I returned back to the real world, we cleared all the alienating feeling we had when we were young, and even had quite a good relationship. Even dad would feel jealous after coming back from America during summer vacation.

Today—Sunday, year 2025, December 14. As mom was at the editorial department like usual, Suguha and I had to buy our own ingredients for lunch. We had Caesar salad with boiled eggs and seafood paella, and so we faced each other at the table and started to tuck in happily…until Suguha took out that piece of paper.

"…Ye-Yeah, it's the same, hm."

I barely looked away from the paper that had the name Kirito on it and put the cherry tomato into my mouth. I chewed on it and said with a vague voice,

"Bu-But, that's a pretty common name, right? I just cut my name short. This Kirito in GGO may be called, Kiri… Kirigamine Tougorou. That could be his real name, yup."

The reason why I would feel such a sharp pain after saying such a blatant lie must be because I said a huge lie to my beloved imouto. Yes, the Kirito that Suguha was talking about was my character in the game.

As for why I had to hide this fact, it was because I had to «convert» my avatar Kirito from ALO to the shooter MMO «Gun Gale Online», a game with lots of problems, so that I could take part in the «Bullet of Bullets» tournament.

This so-called «convert» is to make use of the shared VRMMO functions that «The Seed» platform used. It could convert a character from a certain game into another one while «keeping the same strength». This was a system that was completely unimaginable a few years ago.

Of course, there were some limitations to this system, and the biggest of them was that I could only move a character, and can't move the money and equipment into a new game. Thus, the transfer wouldn't be just a temporary one, but a permanent one.

If I said that I want to transfer from ALO to another game, Suguha, who liked that fairy kingdom, would be really badly affected. On the other hand, I am hesitating over whether I should explain to Suguha why I transferred «Kirito» over to GGO. That's because this has something to do with the darkest secrets of VRMMO.

The man who requested me to investigate the world of GGO was called Kikuoka Seijirou. He was once a member of the government's «SAO incident task force», and now, he's a member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and VR world Division, a government official of what's called the «Virtual Division».

On Sunday a week ago, Kikuoka called me out and told me of something strange.

He noted that amongst the streets of the world of GGO, an avatar would say to other avatars «judgement» and shoot bullets at them. That alone would be merely a prank or a disturbance. However, in the real world, there were two players who died immediately the moment they were shot—that's basically about it.

I do feel that there's a 90% chance that it was all a coincidence.

However, I really couldn't give up on that remaining 10% possibility of a «certain type»…so I accepted Kikuoka's dangerous request and entered the world of GGO, hoping to interact with that shooter who created this commotion.

As there was no time to train my character, I could only convert my Kirito from ALO over and took part in the BoB preliminaries on Saturday yesterday to catch his attention. The initial gunfight caused me quite a headache, but luckily, the first player I met and befriended explained the content of the game to me, allowing me to pass through the preliminaries and a first interaction with the guy who could be the shooter.

Up till now, I still don't know whether that guy who called himself «Death Gun» really had the ability to kill gamers in the real world through the game itself.

However, that made me find out something.

The «Death Gun» and I had an unexpected relationship.

Like me, the «Death Gun» was a «survivor» of that death game—Sword Art Online. Also, I may have fought against him before and even intended to end his life—…

"Onii-chan, you're making that terrifying face again."

On hearing that, my body suddenly jerked. The eyes that were looking up at the sky blankly immediately saw Suguha frowning as she gave me a worried look.

She put down the printed piece of paper she pushed to me onto the table, held her hands together lightly and looked straight at me.

"…Well, erm, actually, I knew that onii-chan… «Kirito-kun» converted over from ALO to GGO."

These sudden words caused me to nearly pop my eyes out. On seeing that, this imouto of mine who's a year younger than me gave me a mature smile that showed that she saw through everything.

"How could I not notice that Kirito-kun already disappeared from my friends list?"

"…No, however, I intend to move back after this weekend…and you don't have to check your friends list all the time…"

"I could feel it without looking."

Suguha said firmly. Those wide eyes were shining with the aura of mystery, and at this moment, I actually had a thought that this person is a girl. This idea was really awkward of me, and besides, the guilt of converting over without telling my imouto caused me to look away. However, Suguha said firmly to me.

"…The moment I noticed that Kirito-kun disappeared yesterday, I immediately disconnected and got ready to rush into onii-chan's room. However, onii-chan definitely wouldn't have any reason to hide from me and leave ALO. I thought that something was amiss, so I contacted Asuna-san."

"I see…"

My neck shrank after I answered briefly.

I only told Asuna—Yuuki Asuna and our «daughter», the AI Yui, that I converted from ALO to GGO. Even if I disappear only for two seconds, let alone days, Yui, who had partial system login authority would find out immediately.

And Yui doesn't like me hiding things from Asuna. Of course, she would definitely understand if I told her that I had some troubles, but I couldn't do that after remembering that my instruction will cause a huge strain on Yui's main program.

Thus, I could only tell Asuna and Yui that 'I have to head to GGO because Kikuoka Seijirou requested me to', and even explained that the aim was to 'investigate the links in The Seed'. However, I couldn't explain the main reason to them. Actually, it was about «Death Gun»'s shooting in the game and the 2 deaths in the real world—

This sounds really ridiculous, but as it was too unique, I felt that it just wasn't right. Also, this was also the biggest reason why I couldn't tell Suguha or my other friends that I converted my data.

I looked down and murmured, and then, I heard something move.

Then, it was the soft footsteps and the feeling of my shoulders being touched.

"…Onii-chan."

Suguha leaned her body on my back and whispered to my ears.

"Asuna-san said that 'he will be back like usual after creating chaos in GGO', but I guess that she should be rather anxious. I'm like her too, because…because, onii-chan, you came back so late last night, and your face was really scary."

"Is…that so."

I could only answer that. Suguha's short hair stroked my neck, and a voice with a tinge of breath was close to my left ear, and ringed,

"It…shouldn't be dangerous, right…? I don't really want you to go somewhere far away…"

"…I won't leave."

This time, I said it clearly to her, and then placed my right hand on the small hand that's on my left shoulders.

"I promise. Tonight, after the GGO event is over, I'll come back to ALO…and this house."

"…Okay."

Suguha seemed to nod her head, and then leaned her upper body over to me as she just remained there.

My imouto was already distraught during the 2 years I was trapped inside SAO, and I really shouldn't have made her so anxious.

Actually, I could send a message to Kikuoka Seijirou that 'I don't want to do it', and just forget about everything-- But after what happened in the preliminaries yesterday, there were two reasons that made it tough for me to do it.

One of the reasons was that I agreed to fight against the girl «Sinon», who wielded some terrifyingly huge sniper rifle, mistook me for some female gamer, and earnestly taught me all sorts of tricks.

And the other reason was my grudge with «Death Gun».

I have to face that man in the grey coat again, confirm his «past name»—and the two friends of his that I killed with my sword. This was supposed to be a responsibility I should have done when I returned back to the real world…

I tapped on the hand Suguha placed on my shoulder, and again said,

"Don't worry, I'll definitely come back. Let's hurry up and eat. The food is about to turn cold."

"…Okay."

Suguha's voice sounded more powerful now as she nodded her head, hugged me on the shoulders and let go after a while.

After she ran back to her seat in small steps, my imouto had a bright smile on her face. She took a large scoop of paella, stuffed it into her mouth, and then twirled her spoon lightly.

"Speaking of which, onii-chan."

"…hm?"

"I heard from Asuna-san that you can earn lots of money in this «job», right?"

"Ugh!"

My mind began to recall the 300,000 yen reward I would receive from Kikuoka, and the PC parts catalog that I was prepared to use the money for...I decided that I could forgo the increased storage capacity, and so slapped my chest confidently.

"O, oh, I'll buy anything for you, so just wait for me to come back."

"That's great! I always wanted to buy a nanocarbon shinai!"

...Looks like I'll have to give up the main memory as well.

I went out earlier than 3pm to avoid the traffic crowd, and hopped onto the old bike before leaving the house.

The vehicle moved through Kawagoe Street as it continued to head east, went past Ikebukuro, and moved through Kasuga Street. After that, I turned south at Hongo, went through Bunkyou City before arriving at the general hospital, which was my current destination.

I came here yesterday, but my memory seemed to be far away.

Actually, the reason was simple. I couldn't sleep no matter how long I laid on my bed, and could only keep my eyes open in the darkness as I tried to remember the long-forgotten past that was deep within me - the entire process of the destruction of the killer guild «Laughing Coffin» during the SAO era.

In the end, I finally gave up trying to sleep on my own and at 4am in the morning, wore the AmuSphere, entered the VR space, used the local area network to call out my «daughter» Yui from the PC in my house and made her continue to talk to me until «sleep mode» was activated. However, I couldn't get a nice long dream because I couldn't sleep soundly.

Luckily, I don't really remember much of the contents, but a voice continued to ring in my ears ever since I woke up.

--Are you Kirito?

That was probably the mutter the gamer called «Death Gun» said to me in the preliminaries yesterday.

And this was also a question to me, the person who used his swords to slay two—no three «Laughing Coffin» members, including that bodyguard of Asuna.

Is it you? You're the «Kirito» who killed us?

I just couldn't answer 'that's right' straight away when facing this question, whether it was the BoB preliminaries or the dream.

During the finals at 8pm today, I guess I will face that guy who looked like an undead. If I am asked that question again, I have to admit this no matter what.

But I just didn't have confidence that I could do this.

"…I knew it would become like this…"

I should have used an entirely new name to enter GGO instead of converting the name «Kirito» over from ALO.

Depreciating myself as I laughed about such a shameful thought, I parked the bike and walked into the ward building.

As I sent a message over before I left, nurse Aki was waiting for me in that hospital room yesterday. Just like yesterday, she had a loosely tied braid on her hair, but today, she had a pair of frameless spectacles on her nose. She was sitting at the chair beside the bed, crossing her long and slender legs as she raised one of them up, and reading the paper book that seemed to be a little outdated. However, she quickly closed the book and smiled once she saw me.

"Ya, you came here rather early, boy."

"Sorry for bothering you again today, Aki-san."

After nodding to her, I looked at the clock and found that it was not even 4pm yet. There're more than 4 hours before the BoB finals begin, but I can't possibly learn much if I sweated too much over nearly missing out on the registration. I guess it's best to appear earlier and get some shooting practice.

I placed my coat on the hanger and said to Nurse Aki.

"Well, since the tournament starts at 8, you can take my ECG then."

Upon doing so, the nurse in the nurse lab coat shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"It's okay. I just finished night duty. I'm on off duty today, so I can accompany you for a few hours."

"Eh…erm, isn't that too awkward…"

"Really? I'll borrow your bed if I want to sleep."

She said these words and winked a bit. As a huge VRMMO addict who has very little experience in BGR, I could only look away vaguely. Nurse Aki chuckled on seeing me like this. As this person saw me in an embarrassing position during my rehab, I could not lift my head up to look at her.

I sat on the bed to hide this awkwardness, and immediately scanned through the screen equipment beside me and the two overlapping silver ringed-helmet—«AmuSphere» that were prepared for me.

Kikuoka specially prepared a brand new machine for me, and there's not a single stain on both the stainless steel or the man-made leather. Its trendy design and feel far surpassed the initial Nerve Gear, and it was more apt to call it a decoration than an electronic device.

This machine shouldn't be able to cause fatal microwaves like what its ad tagline «definitely safe» indicates. No, it's more like it was strictly designed to be able to create weak electric signals.

So normally, there was no need to head to a hospital and connect myself to an ECG and let a nurse stand beside me to guard my safety. No matter what anyone does, the probability of them being able to hurt me through this AmuSphere is zero. No chance whatsoever.

...And yet.

The famous gamers in GGO, «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako», did die in real life.

And the «Death Gun» avatar who fired virtual bullets at them was someone who PKed of his own free will in SAO...a red player.

What if there were some dangerous component still hidden in the FullDive technology?

For example, maybe players who killed people in the abnormal world of SAO started to give off a certain type of digital «killing intent» or «grudge» suited to the VR environment. That gets converted into data by the AmuSphere, is transmitted over the network, becomes some kind of signal in the target's nervous system, and flows inside...actually causing their heart to stop.

If this hypothesis is correct, then maybe it's possible for the attacks of «Death Gun» inside the game to kill players in the real world.

At the same time, it's even possible that the virtual sword wielded by «Kirito» could end up really killing «Death Gun» or someone else.

After all, I've also killed players in Aincrad. Probably more than most of the red players did.

Up till now, I would deliberately forget those who fell at my blade. However, the seal of those memories was opened yesterday.

No, it's more like I couldn't forget about them at all. During this past year, I just lived through while trying to pretend that nothing happened, and continued to escape the price of the sin I committed...

"What's with you, boy? You don't look so good."

The tip of the white slippers suddenly knocked at my knees.

I was so shocked that my shoulders went stiff. Looking up, I found that Nurse Aki was looking at me through the frameless spectacles.

"...Ah...it's nothing..."

I shook my head slightly, but still bit my lips hard in the end. A few hours ago, I made Suguha worry for the same reason. It's too shameful of me to let Nurse Aki worry about me even after accepting such a request.

However, Nurse Aki gave me the encouraging smile she showed when I was doing rehab. She stood up from the chair, moved beside me and said,

"It's a rare chance for a beautiful nurse to give counselling. Just say what's on your mind."

"...I'll likely get divine retribution if I refuse."

Fuu...after exhaling hard, I looked at the floor, hesitated for a while, and said,

"...Well, Nurse Aki. You were in the surgical department before coming over to Rehab, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Please forgive this rude and direct question of mine..."

I glanced up left and asked in a more delicate voice,

"...How long can those patients who died remain in your mind...?"

This is a question I would probably get scolded for or even blank white eyes. If I were a nurse, I'll be wondering what would a brat who doesn't know anything about the surgical scene ask something like he knew what's going on.

However, Nurse Aki still gave me a smile and answered,

"Well..."

She looked at the ceiling of the patient's room for a while, and slowly opened her mouth before saying,

"If I try to recall, I can remember their names and faces. Even if it's a patient whom I spend only an hour with in the same operation room...hm, I can still remember. I only saw them sleeping due to the anaesthetic. That's really unbelievable, isn't it?"

In other words, there were some deaths in the operations Nurse Aki did before...I knew that this isn't something that I can just touch on randomly, but I couldn't help but ask,

"Don't you want to forget them?"

Nurse Aki blinked twice, perhaps seeing my expression I don't know of after I said that. However, the lips that had light lipstick on them continued to maintain their smile.

"Hmm, well...I don't know if I can answer your question here..."

Nurse Aki said that, and then continued with a very hoarse voice,

"Humans will definitely forget once they feel that there's something they should forget. They wouldn't even have any thoughts of wanting to forget. The more you want to forget, the more the memory's ingrained in you, which will make it clearer, right? In that case, I guess...deep inside your

heart, your subconsciousness, you didn't really want to forget about that, right?"

This unexpected answer caused me to take a slight gasp.

The more I want to forget, the more I couldn't forget...?

These words went straight into my heart, leaving a strong bitter taste in my mouth. After I turned it to a self-depreciating smile, I said these words,

"...Then, I'm really a bad person..."

Evading the 'why' stare Nurse Aki was giving me, I looked between my feet on the floor, clenched my fists and placed them on my knees, and used this pressure to release the words from my chest.

"...I killed 3 players...in SAO..."

The dry voice knocked into the white walls of the patient's room and returned as a wonderful echo. No, I guess my brain was the only one that was affected.

I came to this hospital during November and December last year to recuperate, and Nurse Aki was the one in charge of taking care of me. That's how she knew that I was imprisoned inside the virtual world for two years. However, I had never told her about what happened in that world.

Anyone working in the medical care department would definitely feel unhappy about hearing that I took lives. However, I just couldn't stop talking. I could only lower my head further and say with the hoarse voice.

"They were all reds...all «murderers», but I could have chosen not to kill them and make them unable to fight then. But I still slayed them, because of my own rage, anger...and lust for revenge. I have even forgotten about them for this past year. No, I still couldn't remember their names and faces even if I say this now. In other words...I'm the kind of guy who would even forget the people I personally killed."

The moment I shut my mouth up, the patient room became completely silent.

After a while, the sound of clothes rubbing and the shaking of the bed hit me. I guess Nurse Aki who's sitting on my left is about to leave the room.

However, I was wrong. A hand went over my back and was placed on my right shoulder before pulling me over forcefully. At this moment, the left side of my body was stuck tightly onto the nurse lab coat. The tense me that heard a soft voice with light breathing at a position very close to me.

"I'm sorry, Kirigaya-kun. I said confidently that I could ease your emotional problems, but I still can't remove the burden on you. Of course, I can't bear it with you."

The hand that was on my right shoulder started stroking my hand.

"I have never played any VR games, let alone «Sword Art Online»...so I can't feel the weight of the words «kill». However...one thing I definitely know is that you ended up having to do that because you wanted to help someone, right?"

"Eh..."

Her words took me by surprise.

To help others. This element did exist, bu-but, I can't just...

"In healthcare, there are also situations where we have to choose who we want to save, like abandoning an infant to save the mother, to abandon a vegetable to save someone who's waiting for an organ and so on. In a large scale scenario or disaster, there are standards to assess the 'level of injury' and prioritize those who need help. Of course...it's not that we can kill without a good reason. A lost life can't be taken back no matter what price is paid. But...someone like you should also have the right to think that someone was saved because of you. You have the right to redeem yourself by thinking of those people you saved."

"Allowing me...to redeem myself..."

After I said that with a hoarse voice, I shook my head while Nurse Aki's hand was still on me.

"Bu-But...I forgot about those people I killed, threw away those responsibilities and duties, so I shouldn't even be redeemed..."

"It wouldn't hurt that much if you really had forgotten about it."

After saying that with a firm voice, Nurse Aki placed her left hand on my hand and turned me to her. The long narrow eyes behind the frameless spectacles had a tough glow in it. I found that there were tears rolling out

of my eyes the moment she used the thumb with the shortened fingernail to wipe my eyes.

"You still remembered it clearly. Of course, you will remember everything when it's time for you to remember. That's why, you have to remember those you helped and saved at that time too."

After she said that, Nurse Aki placed her forehead near my forehead.

The icy touch caused the swirling heavy brain of mine to calm down. My shoulders started to relax too, and I slowly closed my eyes.

A few minutes later, I was half naked and had electrodes for the ECG stuck on me as I raised my hands to lift the AmuSphere.

Ever since last night, I've always had an icy and heavy fear and responsibility troubling me, and now this burden has finally left me. But once I meet that guy in «Gun Gale Online» again—«Death Gun», the burden will press down on me again.

The VR screen that was as heavy as cast iron was placed on my head. I turned the power on, and immediately, there was soon an electronic chime that indicated the completion of standby. I moved my vision and said to Nurse Aki who was sitting beside the screen equipment,

"I'll leave the control to you then. And, also...about just now...thanks."

"No, it's nothing to be thankful for."

After saying that in a pastor-like tone, the nurse draped a thin blanket on me. I forcefully closed my eyes amidst the aroma of clean soap.

"Well, I doubt anything will be happening until 8...I'll probably be back by 10. I'm going now, then. ——LINK START—!"

After shouting, the colored lights appeared in front of me, and then swallowed me in.

As my senses were gradually severed, Nurse Aki's voice could be heard.

"I understand. Be on your way, «Hero Kirito»-kun."

What...?

Before I could even think, my consciousness left reality and entered that barren wasteland of dust and smoke.

Chapter 8

"That guy..."

CRACK!

"...REALLY INFURIATES ME!"

Exclaiming these words out of her mouth, Asada Shino used the toes of the sneakers she was wearing to kick at the swing.

This is a corner of a little park near Shino's home apartment. The sky had become dark, and this park was a simple area with only 2 recreational equipment and a pile of gravel, thus, no children would come here to play on Sundays.

Sitting beside Shino on the swing was Shinkawa Kyouji, who widened his eyes.

"That's rare of you, Asada-san...for you to criticize someone in such a straightforward manner."

"Because he's really..."

Shino stuck her hands inside her denim dress, leaned her back against the slanted pillar, twists her lips and continued,

"...So thick-skinned, loves to cause sexual harassment, likes to act cool... speaking of which, who the hell uses swords to fight in GGO!"

Everytime Shino would talk about how infuriating «that guy» was to her, she would kick a small pebble beside her foot.

"Also, that guy was even cross-dressing as a girl right at the beginning, and even asked me to choose clothing for him! I nearly lent him money as well!, AAAAHHHHHH!! DAMN IT, WHAT WITH THE 'WON'T YOU RESIGN?'!"

This grumbling continued until there were not suitably-sized stones around. Shino lowered her head, looked beside her, and found that Kyouji was really shocked as he used a certain delicate expression to look back at her.

"...What's the matter, Shinkawa-san?"

"No...it's not rare, but I guess this is the first time you bad-mouthed someone so much..."

"Eh...really?"

"Yeah. Because you normally didn't seem interested in others..."

"..."

On hearing him say this, she started to realize it,

Normally, she wouldn't interact with others enthusiastically. Even if someone pulls a prank—like Endou and the rest, she would merely feel irritated at most because she felt that there was no need to waste too much energy getting angry at them.

If she really had to say it, Shino couldn't even finish her own problems. Who has the time to bother about others? Even so, «that guy» really enraged her greatly for some inexplicable reason. It's been less than 24 hours since they interacted for the first time on Saturday afternoon, and yet that guy remained in her memories, and she couldn't get rid of it.

But it's no wonder that she would be this angry.

It's been half a year since Shino started playing the VRMMO-RPG «GGO». However, she had never met any gamer who invaded her privacy like this. And also, she was overly shocked that he held her hand during the rest period after the first round of the preliminaries, and was so shaken up that she missed two snipes from mid-range in the second round after that.

"...D, don't look at me like this. I get angry easily."

Shino deliberately dragged the pebble far away with her toes and kicked it hard at the shrubs as she mentioned that.

"Fufu~ is that so."

Kyouji continued to stare at Shino, but he seemed to remember something as he suddenly brought his body away from the swing and said enthusiastically,

"Then... do you want to ambush him in some training arena? If you want to snipe, I'll be the bait... but it's better to take revenge from the front right? I can immediately get 2, 3 outstanding machine gunners to help. Using beam matter to stun him and then deal an MPK isn't bad either."

The shocked Shino blinked her eyes at Kyouji, who was planning all sorts of PK, and then raised her right hand to interrupt him.

"Erm, well... I don't mean that. How should I put it... though he infuriates me, his manner of battling is rather upright. I want to have a fight with him under fair circumstances. I lost yesterday... but I know how to fight him, and there's chance for revenge too."

Shino pushed the plain glasses up, and then took her handphone out from her skirt pocket to check the time.

"3 and a half hours left before the BoB finals begin. I'm going to blow a large hole on that guy in that grand event."

Shino pointed her right index finger at the sky in the west, and right where she was pointing at, a red moon could be seen rising.

Last night, on the night of December 13th, there was a preliminaries tournament for the strongest in GGO—the «3rd Bullet of Bullets».

Shino in F group managed to beat her way through, but in the end, the one who appeared in front of her, was the one who was supposed to be a beginner—even though she had a feeling that she would be meeting him, «that guy».

His name was «Kirito», a gamer who transferred all his unique data using «The Seed» platform from a VRMMO Shino didn't know of into GGO.

Shino was on her way to the capital of GGO, the «SBC Gurokken» presidential tower where she met what should be Kirito, who had just entered the game. He asked Shino where the weapons store was, and Shino, who would normally point coldly in a direction and leave, took the initiative to guide him through.

And the reason was—Kirito's avatar looked like a girl no matter how anyone looked at him.

Shino later found out that this M model in GGO was called the «9000 series», an avatar that doesn't look any different from the F model. As this model was extremely rare, the account would be extremely expensive if it were sold. Logically, Kirito's appearance would fit a «beauty» of this price. Long, beautiful straight hair, wide eyes that were seemingly radiating the light of darkness, snowy white skin and a slender body. To be honest, it was more feminine than the real F model Shino had.

Having played GGO for half a year, Shino never met any «beginner female players». Of course, she does know of a few female gamers, but they all

had more experience than Shino—all old-timers. The time they would spend shooting at each other would be much longer than the conversation.

Thus, Shino saw a black-haired girl—who was really a guy—being all lost here and there, and immediately remembered her past, and was soon attracted to him and became his guide.

Both of them chose their equipment in a large store, and Shino then taught him the «bullet trajectory» unique battle system GGO has, and even told him the way to register in the presidential tower. After that, they moved to the waiting dome below the tower and into the rest area to change their street equipment into fighting equipment. Shino then took off all her equipment except for her underwear—and at that moment, Kirito told her his real name and gender.

Shino extremely ashamed, gave him a huge slap and then said,

You must get to the finals. For the lesson's end, I'll teach you the taste of being a loser with a bullet.

But to be honest, she didn't think that he would have a chance.

Kirito was a beginner who just transferred into GGO, and she did not know what this person was thinking as his main weapon wasn't a rifle or a machine gun, but a «photon sword» that's used for close range combat.

It's basically a fantasy to use a sword to beat a gun-user, Shino thought and was about to forget about Kirito—

However, Kirito unexpectedly fulfilled the promise with Shino, and in the group F's preliminaries where 64 people fought it out, he managed to win his way from round 1 through round 5 using a laser blade and a small caliber handgun as his sidearm as he stormed into the finals where Shino was waiting.

At the highway under the sunset that became the stage of the preliminaries finals, Shino witnessed Kirito's amazing fighting ability. He used the energy blade of the photon sword to block the 50 caliber bullet Shino fired from her beloved «Ultima Ratio Hecate II»—or rather, sliced it up.

Kirito rushed in aggressively between the bullet that was sliced in half, got to Shino, pointed his blade at her neck, and muttered in close distance,

"Won't you resign? I don't like cutting a girl."

"~~~~~~~~~~!"

Just recalling that alone made her feel the humiliation she suffered again. Shino then crudely put down the right hand that was pointing at the moon. She looked around for a pebble around her that she could kick, but unfortunately, they were all kicked into the grass. Thus, she could only use the sole of the sneakers to kick at the metal pole.

"...You better get ready. I'll pay back that humiliation with double the interest..."

As she was panting hard, Kyouji got up from the swing and looked bothered as he frowned at Shino's face.

"...Wh, what's wrong?"

"Erm...are you alright? Is it okay for you to do that...?"

Kyouji looked at the right hand of Shino. Unknowingly, her fist that was lightly clenched was now pointing the thumb and index fingers in the shape of a handgun.

"Ah..."

She frantically shook her hand. It's true that this action would make anyone think of a «gun», and Shino's heart would flutter every time. However, there's no such feeling this time, inexplicably.

"Y-Yeah, it's alright...maybe it was because I was angry, but it's nothing much."

"I see..."

Kyouji lowered his head and continued to look at Shino's eyes. He suddenly reached his arms out and cupped Shino's right hand. That warmth and somewhat sweaty feeling of the palms caused Shino to look down instinctively.

"Wha...what is it, Shinkawa-kun?"

"I often feel...extremely worried...Asada-san's different from usual...Yes...if, if there's anything I can help out with, I'll be willing to do it. I can only cheer for you through the screen...but, if there's anything else I can do...I..."

Shino glanced at Kyouji for an instant. That delicate face had only the eyes that were radiating emotions from within and giving off warmth and light.

"Wh...what's this normal me..."

She couldn't remember how she normally looked and muttered. Then, Kyouji's hands started to exert force, and he opened his mouth to prompt,

"Asada-san's normally so cool...always looking like nothing would faze you...you had the same treatment I had in school, but you didn't run away from school like me...you're so strong, so amazing. I've always admired Asada-san's personality...this can be considered my dream."

Overwhelmed by Kyouji's pressuring presence, Shino wanted to back away, but the swing pillar behind her wouldn't let her.

"Bu, but...I'm not strong at all. I, you know...I'll react once I see a gun..."

"But Sinon is different."

Kyouji stepped forward.

"She can use such a powerful weapon at will...and is said to be one of the strongest players in GGO. I think that's the real Asada-san. The Asada-san in the real world will definitely become up like, so you don't have to worry...seeing you waver and angry because of that, I...I really wanted to help..."

--However, Shinkawa-san.

Looking away slightly for a while, Shino muttered deep inside.

--A long time ago, I would cry and laugh like an ordinary person. I didn't become «the current me» on my own will.

It was definitely Shino's wish to become as strong as the current Sinon. However, she wanted to overcome her fear of machinery, and not that she abandoned all her feelings.

Perhaps deep inside her, she still wanted to laugh and make noise with her friends like an ordinary person, which was why she helped that person in a rare out-of-character manner the moment she saw that lost beginner girl on Glockenspiel street, and why she got angry after knowing that he was a male.

Shino was grateful that Kyouji was so concerned about her, but even so, she felt that this feeling was somewhat misplaced.

--I...I, what I want...

"Asada-san..."

A soft voice suddenly rang beside Shino's ears, causing her eyes to widen. Unknowingly, Kyouji's arms were hugging her together with the metal pole.

Even though the empty park was already surrounded in darkness, however, there were passers-by walking on the street opposite the pedestrian path with trees that were shed bare of leaves. Right now, if anyone were to see Shino or Kyouji now, they would think that they were a couple.

On thinking about this, Shino then pushed Kyouji's body back instinctively.

"..."

Kyouji looked at Shino with a hurt expression. She was shocked and hurriedly explained,

"So, sorry. I'm happy that you said that...you're the only good friend I could make here, but...I don't have that kind of feelings yet, because I can only solve my problem by fighting on..."

"...I see..."

Seeing Kyouji lower his head in a lonely manner, the girl was having a guilty feeling.

Kyouji should have known about Shino's past—that incident. Before he refused to come to school, Endou and the rest had spread this news to the entire school, but even after knowing about that, he was still willing to be friends with her. Shouldn't she express her feelings now? Of course, it's not like Shino did not have that idea. She knew that she would be extremely lonely if Kyouji left her in a sad manner.

However, a corner in her subconsciousness wouldn't let her forget about that guy, Kirito's face. He had way too much confidence and belief in his own ability. Shino hoped to fight him so that she could go all out.

Yes—right now, Shino's only wish was to break the black and hard shell that covered her heart and release herself from her fearful memories. To do that, she wanted to fight in the sunset wasteland and win.

"So...can you wait until then?"

She said in a really soft voice. Kyouji looked at Shino with eyes that had many different feelings, and after a while, smiled. He indicated 'thank you' with his lips, and Shino smiled too.

After leaving the park and saying goodbye to Kyouji, Shino hurriedly returned home and bought some mineral water and aloe vera yogurt for dinner. She would normally try to cook a healthy balanced meal for herself, but after more than 3 hours of gaming, there would be many reasons why gamers shouldn't put too much food in their stomach.

Kasa kasa, the girl held the bag that was letting out that sound, rushed up the stairs, stepped into her house, hurriedly put the electronic lock on, went through the kitchen, arrived at the 6mat room inside and glanced at the clock on the wall.

It would be a while before the finals of BoB start at 8 pm, but Shino wanted to log in early and spend time to examine her equipment, ammunition, and to focus her thoughts.

She quickly took off the thick denim jumper skirt and the cotton shirt underneath, hung them on the hanger, and then took off her upper underwear and threw it into a basket at a corner. She huddled her body smaller due to the cold air wavering above the floor as she changed into a more comfortable outfit consisting of a sweatshirt that doubled as a tank top, and shorts.

After adjusting the air conditioner so that the air was not too hot, and switching on the humidifier, Shino took a deep breath and sat down on the bed. She took out the PET bottle from the plastic bag, opened the cap and took a sip.

The sensor interrupt function of the AmuSphere could disrupt 99% of all the functions when diving in. However, Shino managed to learn many ways to allow for a comfortable gaming environment. Eating less before diving and going to the toilet are things that are overemphasized. Also, one has to note the temperature, humidity, and also wear clothes that didn't burden her. She once logged in during summer break after drinking lots of ice water, and felt immense stomach pain in the middle of a battle before getting interrupted by the AmuSphere that detected that something was wrong. Of course, once her stomachache was alright and when she tried to connect again, her character was already dead and respawned back onto the street.

Hardcore VRMMO gamers who had lots of money would seek complete sensory interruption and enter this place called an «isolation tank». Nowadays, the high-class internet cafés that also act as relaxation facilities would start to have this tank, and Kyouji had invited Shino over to this kind of shop a month ago.

The room was for single-person use. After bathing inside the bathroom that's available in the room, the user will be completely naked and lie inside a capsule that takes up half the space of the room. The inside of the capsule was unexpectedly spacious, a viscous liquid that was properly adjusted, 40cm deep.

On lying inside, the body will float up, and the user won't feel the pillow that's supporting the neck. Once the user wears the AmuSphere that's hanging on the inside of the capsule and closes it, the tank will be immediately surrounded by complete darkness and silence.

Actually, that floating feeling inside that space was already a rather interesting experience, but as she agreed to meet Kyouji in GGO, Shino entered the VR space.

On logging in, the information processed to the five senses from the virtual world was unusually clear. Kyouji said this was because the body senses have reached the minimum, and thus, there weren't any sounds made from the «sensor interruption leak» at all. Ignoring this application, that sort of feeling where she could even hear the enemy's soles stepping on sand showed its worth to her.

However, she felt an indescribable feeling of anxiety that couldn't be expressed in words.

Or rather, it's more like she was worried about her body once she got removed away from the real world. Once she dived into the VR world, she would be lying on the bed in the real world like a doll, and this anxiety that's brought about by this fact would be enhanced by the capsule.

Of course, as compared to the «Devil Machine» Nerve Gear, the safety measures on AmuSphere were way too much. It not only prevents the sensor interruption from working—which was why a capsule was needed—but also even the sound, light, vibration and other stimulants to activate easily as part of the safety system and bring the user back to reality.

Even so, the body that dived in was completely defenseless. In a certain sense, this would be rather similar to sleep, but Shino couldn't shake off the stinging pain on her neck when she logged in through the isolation capsule. In the end, she made a conclusion—her small little room was the safest place in the world where she could log in safely even though there would be some noise from outside.

Shino pondered as the spoon in her hand continued to her mouth. The yogurt was then eaten completely. After putting the container into the sink and washing it, she threw it into the recycling bag. She then went to the bathroom to brush her teeth, use the toilet, wash her hands and face before returning back to the room.

"—Okay!"

Pitan. She slapped her cheeks and laid down on the bed. Her handphone was already switched to silent mode, and the door and aluminum windows were completely locked. She finished her homework that's to be handed in on Monday during the day, and all the trivial things she should worry about in the real world should be completely dealt with.

She put on the AmuSphere and pressed the switch to turn off the lights. At this moment, the face of the player she thought of beating continued to appear on the ceiling that's gradually turning darker before disappearing.

Finally, what appeared in front of her was a swordsman of light who had glamorous black hair and fresh red lips—Kirito. His left hand was wielding the handgun, and the photon sword was in his right hand as it was kept down. He was giving a smile of contempt as he looked straight at Shino.

The will to fight was immediately lit inside Shino as this guy could be the strongest enemy she could find in the vast killing wilderness. He could help Shino break that power of the past, and in a certain sense—he was her last hope.

I will fight him with all I've got, and I'll win.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, Shino closed her eyes and got ready to utter the keyword that would shift her soul. The next moment, the room clearly resounded with her rather strong-willed voice.

"LINK START!!"

The horizontal gravity the body felt suddenly disappeared, and a somewhat light floating sense replaced it.

Next, the sky and ground seemed to rotate about 90 degrees. Sinon's toes touched the hard floor like a soft slide, and only opened her eyes once the senses of the fake body was completely aligned.

First, what appeared in front of her eyes was a large neon red hologram that was flying as it dragged its tail through the night sky that had no stars. The red words 'Bullet of Bullets 3' were flashing on the tower.

Sinon appeared at the middle of the north end of Glockenspiel street, the plaza in front of the presidential complex. Normally, this would be a place that rarely had people around, but today, this place is full of numerous players, and each of them were holding food and drinks and partying about. Actually, this was to be expected. Now, the betting pool for the upcoming BoB finals began, and more than half the money that existed in GGO was gathered in this plaza.

The payout rate was shown on the hologram in the air, and the bookmakers who were dressed in a rather splendid manner—what's scary was that they weren't players, but «official bookmaker NPC» that were created by the operating company—and information brokers who were selling suspicious information were swarming about. Sinon suddenly remembered about something and went near a bookmaker NPC, and then looked up at the window, only to find that her odds payout were rather high. This should be because of how she lost yesterday. Thinking about this, she looked for Kirito's name, only to find that he was one of those who had a high payout as well.

Fu, Sinon snorted and thought of wanting to bet her entire fortune on herself. But after thinking about how this would wear off her main objective, the girl turned to leave the crowd. As her appearance was known by all, and as a regular in the BoB finals, there were many looks from all over as they watched her leave. However, nobody had the courage to approach her for everyone knew that Sinon was «a wildcat-type girl who'll take action mercilessly once she finds someone to be an enemy».

She wanted to enter the dome waiting area to gather her concentration, and thus moved towards the presidential tower. After walking for a while, someone suddenly called her by her name from behind.

"Sinon!"

There was only one player in the world of GGO who would call her that way. The moment she turned around, she saw Shinkawa Kyouji, who she left several minutes ago in the real world, controlling his avatar «Spiegel» as he waved his hand at her and ran over. A tall and skinny M model avatar that had city clothes on seemed to be slightly red from excitement.

"Sinon, why were you so slow? I was worried about you—what's wrong?"

Spiegel felt weird after seeing that Sinon had a smile on her face.

"It's nothing. It's just that I found it amazing that I could immediately meet someone in a game after having just met that person in real life."

"...I'd say, I'm not so cool looking in the real world as I am in the virtual world. What about you? What are your chances of winning? Do you have some tactics?"

"If I have to put my chances of winning...I can only say that I'll do my best. Basically, it'll be to search out the enemy continuously, snipe and move."

"That's true, that's true. But...I believe that Sinon will definitely win."

"Yeah, thanks. What do you intend to do next?"

"Well...I can only watch the live feed in a certain hotel..."

"Okay, once it's over, I'll meet you at the hotel. Are we going to celebrate for me, or are you going to drink some wine with me to sober up?"

Sinon again smiled as she said this, and Spiegel again looked down before looking up again. He suddenly grabbed Sinon's right arm and dragged her into a corner of the plaza. Spiegel didn't even care whether any other players could see them as he quickly spun his head around to look at the rather nervous looking Sinon, who could only blink her eyes.

"Sinon...no, Asada-san."

Spiegel should have realized how rude it is to call others by their real names in VRMMO, so this really shocked Sinon.

"Wha...what...?"

"Can I trust your words just now?"

"My words just now..."

"You said that you want me to wait, right...? Asada-san, you said that after you determined your own ability, you and me..."

"Why-Why are you saying that all of a sudden!?"

Feeling her cheeks burning up, Sinon hid her face inside the muffler, but Spiegel stepped forward and again grabbed Sinon's right hand.

"I...I, I really like Asada-san..."

"Sorry, can you please not mention this now?"

After saying that in a slightly stern mode, Sinon shook her head.

"I have to concentrate on this tournament now...I have to fight with all I've got to have a chance of winning..."

"...I see, you're right..."

Spiegel let his hand go.

"But I-I'll trust you. I'll believe, and wait for you."

"Y-Yeah. ...then, I-I think it's time to get ready...got to go."

Sinon would probably enter the tournament with a wavering heart if she continued to talk with Spiegel, and so she backed away.

"Do your best. I'll cheer for you."

She nodded her head at Spiegel, whose voice was full of enthusiasm, and gave a stiff smile before leaving. During the time she exited the dark corner of the building and quickly headed towards the entrance of the presidential estate, Sinon felt those stares that seemed to burn her back.

After passing through the glass entrance and arriving at the inside of the building that had very few people, the girl finally relaxed her shoulders.

Thinking whether her attitude made him misunderstand, she leaned on the stone pillar.

Kyouji's affections for her were expressed blatantly, but to be honest, it's already tough for her to handle her own problems.

Sinon couldn't remember how her deceased father looked at all. To her, the male face she had the biggest impression on was the criminal who robbed the post office that day. Once trouble happened, her phobia would

work up, and that person's face would appear in her head. That seemingly endless depth in the heinous expression seemed to be hiding in the darkness around Sinon, looking at her.

As for getting a boyfriend like the other girls, chit-chatting on the phone, going out on weekends, these things weren't things that she never thought of before. However, if she went out with Kyouji like this, one day, she may see «those eyes» in him. This was what she was most afraid of.

If the trigger to her phobia wasn't just «gun», but that she'll feel scared on seeing a «man»—it'll be extremely tough for her to continue surviving.

She could only fight. That's all she could do right now.

Gash! Sinon forcefully stamped her soles at the floor and headed towards the elevator that's deep within the atrium.

However, someone again called her from behind. This voice that called her name was clear and somewhat hoarse, different from the deep voice of Spiegel. Sinon could only close her eyes on hearing this voice call her.

As she turned around with an irritated feeling, the one who was standing in front of her was obvious— «that guy» she so hated.

Chapter 9

The place I landed at was at the most northern area of GGO's capital, «SBC Gurroken», on the corner near the presidential tower.

Under the depressing sunset sky, the bustling neon lights continued to move through the crowds. The contents above seemed to be corporate advertisements. If this was ALO, the players would be complaining loudly about how this would 'destroy the world view', but the depressing scenery does match the theme of a futuristic wasteland city. And of course, the most glaring one of these neon lights was the advertising of the upcoming 3rd «Bullet of Bullets» tournament. My body started to tremble the moment I saw those bright red words. Of course, this wasn't out of fear, but out of excitement—or at least I would hope to believe.

I heaved a sigh and turned around, and subconsciously flung the black hair on my shoulders. As my hair came to rest back on my shoulders, I found myself sighing at my actions, but still managed to convince myself that in the end, this is the proof that I'm already used to my own avatar.

I intended to complete my registration at the tournament and then move slightly far away from the presidential estate, but there were a few stares aimed at me from both sides of the road. This felt somehow unbearable. I wanted to glare back at them, but decided against it in the end.

Actually, they weren't really noticing me. It was just that my avatar here looked just like a girl—a pretty girl at that too. If our positions were switched too, even I would be looking.

Normally, there wouldn't just be stares, but also two or three players coming over to talk me up. However, the guys will immediately keep their distance once they saw me approach. I guess the reason was because everyone saw me fighting like a berserker with the photon sword and charging at the enemies yesterday during the preliminaries of BoB.

The tournament only revealed the names and number of times participated in the tournament from the data of the participant, and «Kirito» was a gender-neutral name. That's likely why everyone in GGO felt that I was «a girl who is also a psycho; a savage killer that deliberately chooses to swing a saber, instead of a gun».

I didn't really wish to be viewed as such a person, but that misunderstanding was worth it if I could let the other players in the BoB

finals hesitate. Besides, my aim wasn't to win, but to meet that guy with the broken mantle—«Death Gun».

The «Death Gun»'s name wasn't amongst the 30 finalists, but he was definitely participating in the finals. If his aim was to show off his power in the world of GGO, the BoB in the game would be the best stage for all to see. Death Gun's real name—even though it's weird, should be the name of the other character in the system.

First, I have to find his name, and then talk to him again in the tournament. Once I find out the name he used in SAO, I can use that information to find out his name in the real world. Kikuoka Seijirou said that he should be able to access the player account data that had become classified. Once we get to know that person's real name, we should be able to find out whether he really killed «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako», no, if he could really kill.

However, during this process, I need to go through my own past crime.

That fear still hasn't disappeared.

But this is a necessary emotion to prevent myself from choosing a path to run away, to forget.

I clenched both fists, stomped hard on the ground with the soles of my battle boots, and headed towards the large tower of the presidential estate that was gradually appearing in front of me.

As for a tournament against others, I would get excited during ALO, and even during SAO.

Unexpectedly though, I would have to take part in this tournament with fear.

As I showed a self-depreciating smile, I headed up the wide stairs that lead to the tower, and found that there was a familiar sand-colored muffler swaying about at the entrance hall in front of me.

Without even looking at her clear blue short hair and the long legs that extended out from under the jacket, I knew that it was the avatar of my final opponent in the preliminaries yesterday –the sniper «Sinon». She was the only person I knew of in GGO, but I was still hesitating over whether I should head forward to greet her.

As I was immediately lost the moment I dived into this world yesterday, I had to brace myself and ask Sinon, who I just met, and at that time, I didn't

realize immediately that she mistook me as a female player because of my appearance and somehow ended up acting as «a beginner girl who didn't know what to do at all». Other than asking her to explain the game mechanics and helping me to choose my equipment, I even went overboard by witnessing her avatar wearing only her underwear in the rest area.

No—That wasn't all.

During the tournament, I suddenly met the shooter «Death Gun» and was approached by him. I learnt that he was «a survivor of SAO» and also a member of the red guild «Laughing Coffin», which really shocked me. Thus, in the finals against Sinon after that, I nearly gave up on it. Basically, I was walking weakly during the start of the battle, trying to get Sinon to shoot the fatal round at me so that I could lose the battle.

However, Sinon didn't hit me.

She shot 6 rounds that were burning in blueish-white flames due to anger, then gave up her advantage, and met me straight on and shouted.

She said, stop joking around, I should die alone if I wanted to, and even said that it's my right to think that this was just a match in a game, but I should not force my values on others—

To be honest, these words hurt me deeply.

Actually, I said something similar to someone else a long time ago.

It was four years ago. At that time, I was just promoted to second year of middle school, and was very lucky, or rather, unlucky to be chosen as a player of the «Sword Art Online Closed Beta», and everyday, I would dive into what I didn't know was a death game, the floating game city Aincrad until the next morning.

It was really a little embarrassing for me to say that, but the «Kirito» that later became a legendary warrior wouldn't really interact with people back then as compared to now even though I used to be a little famous for being amongst the top in PvP events, so I didn't have any people I could call friends in games. However, amongst the people I knew, there were still a few players who I thought that I could become friends with. One of them was a mild-mannered, tea-haired swordsman I would often meet in a duel event. He was skilled in using a one-handed sword.

This person would often fight with great logic and sharp senses, and I've always hoped to meet him in the finals of the tournament. I had been secretly wishing to fight him in the finals, but when that stage finally arrived—I received a great shock. At the last moment of this intense battle, he deliberately took the slash that he should be able to avoid. I guessed that he deliberately lost to earn some quick cash from gambling, and basically blasted him with those words Sinon said to me.

I was scolded like how I scolded him during the final stage of the BoB tournament, so I sincerely apologized to Sinon. Even though we faced off against each other head on, it should be hard for Sinon to accept it. No matter what, she's a sniper, and her greatest weapon is to shoot those long distance sure-kill bullets. During the battle royale tournament today, I suppose she would be trying her best to shoot that bullet of revenge right between my forehead.

Because of the above mentioned reasons—or rather, because I caused all of them, I was hesitating over whether I should say hello to Sinon, who was a few steps in front of me.

But after a few seconds, I shook off my hesitation and took huge steps up the stairs before calling her by her name.

"Yo, Sinon, please guide me through today too."

That muffler of hers that looked like a tail stopped, and the aqua blue hair looked cat like the way it pointed upwards. The sniper girl who spun around with the right foot as her axis gave an irritated expression that showed that she hated me to the bone, and then coldly snorted.

"…Please guide me through. What do you mean by that?

The anger in her blue eyes made me immediately regret it, but I didn't call her just for naught. It'll be bad if I said something wrong and made her ignore me. Thus, I said with a rather serious expression,

"Of course…I hope we can both fight with all we got."

"Stop being disgusting."

--Looks like I made a mistake right off the bat. However, I didn't give up as I continued,

"Speaking of which, why did you dive in so early? There's still 3 hours before the tournament."

"Wasn't that because a certain someone caused me to nearly miss the registration yesterday."

Sinon looked away and grumbled before glancing at me, who's giving off cold sweat.

"…Speaking of which, aren't you logged in now too? Why are you talking like I'm the one who had nothing to do."

"The-Then, let's use this time effectively! How about we get a drink before the battle begins…no, exchange information…"

I really won't dare to say this to a real person in the real world. No, considering that I already have a girlfriend in Asuna, it's unforgivable even in the virtual world. However, I dare to swear to god that this isn't about trying to get a date in the VR world, but to fulfill my duty and mission, and also a necessary step to ensure Sinon's own safety.

--In the end, Sinon seemed like she didn't notice my complicated entanglement as she glared at me for a few seconds before snorting and nodding her head with the minimum action.

"Alright then, I'll be the one telling you all the information again."

"I-I, well…it's not that I didn't have this intention…"

I managed to mumble vaguely and had to run to keep up with Sinon, who was walking away in front of me.

After completing our registration at the hall of the presidential estate through the machine there, Sinon brought me over to a large spacious underground area. As the lights were dimmed to a minimum all around, I could barely see the faces of the players that were gathered at different tables. The few large-screen panel monitors on the ceiling were dazzling with their original colors.

Sinon went into a booth that was far inside and then looked at the menu displayed on a simple metallic board. She then pressed a small button beside the iced coffee label. Soon, the similarly metallic table opened up a hole, and a glass that was filled with black liquid appeared from within. Compared to having to order our food with the NPC and waiting for them to

serve it up in Aincrad, this method is somewhat simple, but it also does fit the game atmosphere of GGO.

I pressed the button for ginger ale and grabbed the glass that appeared before gulping down half. While waiting for the imaginary bubbles to disappear from my throat, I decided to start off.

"…The battle royale finals is to put 30 players in the same map, and to begin a gunfight once we meet the opponent, and the winner will be the guy that lasts till the end…am I right?"

In the end, Sinon glared at me through the coffee glass, and said,

"See, you're intending to let me explain, right? Speaking of which, this information is written on the e-mail the operating company sent to the participants."

"I-I did look through it…"

Actually, I did look through it briefly. I intended to read the specifics after logging into the game, but before that, I met Sinon who was a veteran, so I guess it'll be faster for her to teach me directly…I wouldn't dare to say that, so I merely coughed dryly to continue on.

"Well…I just want to check if there's anything wrong with my understanding…"

"You actually dared to say that."

That extremely cold voice of hers caused my heart to freeze in half. Luckily, Sinon placed the glass back at the table and quickly started to explain the rules of this round.

"…Basically, it's like what you just said, the final round is really held with all 30 players fighting each other on the same map. The starting positions are randomized, but every player will be at least 1,000m away from each other, so there won't be cases of the enemy appearing right in front of you all of a sudden."

"1... 1,000 meters? That means that map is rather big…?"

I couldn't help but interrupt, and the blue laser-like eyes shot back at me.

"Did you really look through the e-mail? This was written in the first paragraph.. The map of the final round is a circle with a 10km diameter. It

has hills, forests and deserts, so nobody will have superior equipment or abilities."

"10-10km!? That's rather big…"

It's about the size of the first level of the floating city Aincrad. However, that means that in this area that's large enough for 10,000 people to hunt, there are only going to be 30 people that will be separated from each other by 1,000m.

"…But, can we really meet our enemies like this? There's a possibility we can't even see anyone until the tournament time's up…"

"This is a game where we fight each other using guns, so there's a need for such a wide map. Sniper rifles have 1km shooting range, and assault rifles have about 500m. If all 30 people are all packed in a small map, everyone would be shooting madly, bang bang, when it starts, and more than half the participants would be dead already."

"Hahaa, I see…"

I nod my head in agreement, and Sinon continued with her detailed explanation. Maybe behind this sharp and cold avatar is a kind and gentle girl—if she finds out that this is what I thought, she'll definitely walk away without finishing off, so I still continued to listen to her explanation.

"—Well, just as you said, you can't fight if you can't meet an enemy. Some people will also use this to hide until the last person remains. Therefore, the participants are automatically given a device called a «Satellite Scan Terminal»."

"Satellite…is it some spy satellite or something?"

"That's right. Every 15 minutes, the satellite in the air will be set to scan through. At this moment, everyone's terminal will receive the location of all the players. And the name of the players will be indicated if you touch the flashes on the map."

"Fmu…so, there's only 15 minutes to hide at one spot? So we're likely to be ambushed once our locations are shown on the map, right?"

"That's the case."

I smiled and asked Sinon, who's nodding away.

"But isn't this rule bad for snipers? Aren't you suppose to hide and cover like a taro and snipe at the enemy?"

"Describing me as a taro is too much."

Sinon glared at me with those explosive blue sparkling eyes, and then coldly snorted and gave a proud smile.

"15 minutes is enough for me to fire one bullet, kill one person, and move 1km."

"Is…is that so..?"

I don't think that would be an exaggeration. If I try to ambush Sinon through the satellite information, it's likely that she will snipe me from afar instead. I remembered this dearly in my heart, coughed dryly for a bit, and then sorted through the information I received.

"Eh—this means that I have to continue to move and take down the enemies once the round begins, and then hang on until I'm the last one…something like that. And every 15 minutes, the map terminal on my hand will show the locations of all the players, so I can tell then who's alive and who's not—well, is my understanding correct?"

"That's basically it."

Sinon nodded her head in affirmation and finished up her iced coffee before forcefully putting the glass onto the table and got ready to get up.

"Then, there's nothing else, right? I'll fire the trigger without any mercy the next time I meet you…"

"Waa, hold on hold on, I'm just getting into the main point."

That really sounded like a line from a certain civil servant, I secretly thought as I hurriedly reached out to tug at the corner of Sinon's jacket.

"…What else do you want?"

Even though she showed an extremely irritated expression as she deliberately looked at the military watch on her left wrist, I continued to nod my head without looking dejected, and Sinon sighed hard before sitting down again. She placed both elbows on the table, and then pressed her small chin against the fingers that were intertwined together, telling me to continue with the movements of her eyebrows.

"Erm, well, I'm…I'm thinking about asking something that's a little weird…"

I stuttered as I finished and quickly waved my left hand to call out the menu window.

VRMMO that were in the specifications of «The Seed» have an almost similar menu window, so I changed it into a mode where others could see it and quickly scrolled the tab down.

I showed the page with the names of the 30 players the operating company sent to the participants of the BoB finals. Of course, we could see the names of the finals of group F, first place 'Kirito' and second place 'Sinon'.

After glancing at the screen I showed her for a moment, an angry twitch appeared on Sinon's nose as she frowned like a cat—no, like a jaguar.

"…What, are you gloating your victory over me in the finals yesterday?"

On hearing that spiteful low growl of hers, I hurriedly gasped and shook my head with a serious expression.

"That's not it, I didn't mean that."

Perhaps she noticed my change in attitude? Sinon frowned her beautiful eyebrows and said,

"…Then what do you want from me? Showing this participant list all of a sudden."

"Among the 30 people on the name list, how many do you not know?"

"Haa…?"

I ignored Sinon, who was giving an extremely surprised look as I moved my fingers down the name list that's not really long.

"Please tell me. This is very important to me."

"…Well, it's not like I can't tell you…"

Though she still had a bit of suspicion, Sinon still continued to look at the purple holographic window on the table, and her blue eyes quickly scanned through from left to right.

"Erm…it's already the 3rd BoB, so I know pretty much all the people there. Those first-timers in the finals…other than a certain infuriating light saber user, there are 3 other people I don't know."

"3 of them? Their names?"

"Nn…«Jyuushi X» and «Pale Rider», and…this «Sterben» guy, right?"

Sinon stiffly read a few names, and I read through the names on the window to check personally. Except for the «Jyuushi X», the other names were written in the English alphabet. I closed my eyes and repeated these three names a few times.

At this moment, Sinon looked half-shocked and half anxious as she said to me.

"Oi, what's going on? You've been asking the questions up till now, and yet you haven't explained anything to me."

"Ahh… yeah…"

I used an ambiguous reply to buy time as my mind continued to think.

The 3 names Sinon told me—

One of them should be the reason why I came to this world. He's related to the two mysterious deaths, and also a survivor of SAO who's affiliated to the red guild «Laughing Coffin»—the character commonly known as «Death Gun».

The reason why I deduced this was because up till now, Death Gun kept his real name rather privy. If possible, he would really want to use «Death Gun» as a character name, but in that case, he'll get lots of spam e-mail, and will even cause lots of trouble. Also, if the real character becomes overly famous, the rumor of the «Death Gun» he would have painstakingly built up will disappear. Thus, he has to hide his real name up till now, and Sinon definitely won't know of this person's existence.

Now, the problem will be, which one of them is the real «Death Gun»…

Just when I was pondering, a white slender hand entered my vision. That hand was prodding at the surface of the table with the thumb.

Looking up, I saw Sinon narrow her eyes as she glared me me.

"…I'm really going to be angry. What the heck are you doing? Is this some strategy to make me angry and get me to make a mistake in the finals?"

"No…that's not it, I didn't mean that…"

On feeling that sharp high-temperature flame-like stare, I bit my lips tightly.

I really couldn't decide immediately whether I should explain the truth to her. I believe the rumor that 'There's a player in GGO who calls himself «Death Gun» and has been shooting on streets and in bars, and the players who were shot by him never logged in again' would be rather widespread, but there's still no player who would believe that they were killed. Of course, Sinon in front of me should be the same too.

To be honest, I didn't really believe this completely. For a player to fire bullets in a game to kill someone in real life—is completely impossible no matter what reasoning Kikuoka and I used when we discussed this a few days ago.

But right now, I can't even laugh at Death Gun's ability. If that guy was really an important member of the old «Laughing Coffin», he'll definitely be one of the killer players who were enthusiastically taking away the lives of many players in Aincrad. Maybe he developed a certain way of killing that far surpassed Kikuoka and my own imaginations during that terrifying experience. This possibility still exists.

If I tell all I know to Sinon and also that the power of the Death Gun may be real—you may die, you shouldn't take part in the tournament this time, will she listen to me? No, absolutely not. That image of Sinon as she showed me the side of her desperate face because she nearly missed the registration after shopping with me. This girl should have some important reason why she has to take part in the BoB tournament…

The blue eyes that were glaring at this silent me—suddenly softened.

Her light-colored lips said without moving too much,

"…Don't tell me that the reason why your face suddenly became weird during the preliminaries yesterday was also because of that?"

"Eh…"

Sinon and I exchanged looks, and for a moment, we couldn't say anything.

However, I forgot all my reasoning and thoughts as I nodded away like I was prompted to. A teeny-weeny voice came from my own mouth,

"…Ahhh…that's right. Yesterday, I was suddenly called by someone who used to play a similar VRMMO in the underground dome…I thought that he would be taking part in the battle today. I'm afraid that one of the three people was him…"

"Were you friends?"

I shook my head hard on hearing Sinon's question, messing my hair up in the process.

"No, quite the opposite…we're enemies. Me, and him, we seriously tried to kill each other before. But…I can't remember that guy's name back then. I have to recall it. I want to meet this player in the finals… find out why he is here, and what he is doing…"

After explaining till here, I realized that my words may have confused Sinon. In a normal VRMMO game, even players in opposing guilds are technically still rivals playing the same game. It'll be too much of an exaggeration to use the title «enemy».

However—

The sniper with the aqua blue hair didn't laugh at my words, but widened her small eyes, and then muttered with a weak voice that the system could barely identify.

"…You tried to kill each other…enemies…"

And then, she used the same soft volume to raise another question that's enough to pierce through my consciousness.

"…Is it because your play styles didn't match, or your relationship between each other worsened when you were in a party because of some trouble? Or…"

On hearing till this, I shook my head in reflex.

"No, we were really betting our lives and trying to kill each other. That guy…that guy's guild did something unforgivable, and both sides couldn't come to a peaceful resolution. We had no choice but to settle this with swords. I wasn't regretful about doing this, but…"

I know this will only bother Sinon, but my mouth just couldn't stop. I grip the hands that were placed on the table, trying to look deep into those blue eyes, and try to force out my voice from the dry throat.

"…But, I-I just continued to run away from the responsibility I should have taken, and never had I thought about the meaning behind this action. Until today, I was forcing myself to forget…but now, I can't continue to escape. I have to solve this problem head on."

These words seemed to be said right back at myself. Of course, Sinon shouldn't be able to understand at all. The moment I shut my mouth, Sinon looked down as well. The thought that she got a weirdo here deep inside her heart should be even greater now, I think.

"…Sorry for such ridiculous words. Just pretend that you never heard them. Anyway, it's just my past grudge…"

I deliberately forced a smile and prepared to simplify things.

But Sinon muttered to interrupt my words.

"—'If your bullet can really kill a player in the real world, can you squeeze the trigger without hesitation'."

"…!"

I quickly gasped.

This was the question I asked from deep inside me to Sinon during the tournament preliminaries finals yesterday. Actually, I still don't understand why I asked this, but at that moment, I did ask back instantly, as fast as a spark, on hearing Sinon ask 'how do I get to be as strong as you'.

An attack in the virtual game world killed a player in the real world. From the way nobody believed in the rumor of the «Death Gun», it's likely that this is impossible in theory. However, this rule occurred in the world that doesn't exist now.

At this moment, I could only remain silent, and Sinon stared at my eyes with a sharp gaze—and opened her small lips to say,

"You are…Kirito, perhaps you're, from that game…"

This seemingly voiceless question immediately vanished as it melted in the dry air of the bar. The wavering blue eyes looked down before shaking silently.

"…Sorry, I shouldn't be asking about this."

"…No, it's alright."

I could only answer this with regards to this unexpected apology, and we continued to look at each other under this tense silence.

I don't intend to tell Sinon that I was an ex «Sword Art Online» player, a «survivor of SAO». But if I don't say so, she will never be able to understand my explanation just now.

This Sinon should be able to understand the meaning of the word «enemy» I used, and she would be able to understand the detailed meaning of «killing each other».

I just waited silently for the girl to show that disgust and annoyance in her eyes.

However—

Sinon didn't look away, and she didn't leave her seat. She leaned forward and stared at me. The sapphire eyes of hers, for some reason, seem to be giving some sort of…maybe a glint, a plea for help, or maybe that's just my imagination.

The next moment, Sinon closed her eyes tightly, and then bit her lips tight.

I didn't even have the time to be shocked as the tense atmosphere between us disappeared. After exhaling deeply, the sniper girl gave an obscure smile and whispered to me softly,

"…Well, it's about time to head back to the waiting dome, or else we won't have time to check our equipment and warm-up."

"Ah…ahh, that's right."

I nodded my head, and Sinon stood up. I looked at the simple digital watch on my left wrist, and found that the time was soon going to be 7pm. There's still an hour before the finals tournament start.

As we arrived at the simple elevator at the corner of the huge bar, Sinon pressed the down button, the metal gate let out a creaking sound as it

slides aside, and the elevator appeared. The moment we entered, I was the one who pressed the bottom most button.

In this cramped space that's had an imaginary descending feeling and the sound of machinery, a soft voice rang.

"I know you have your own difficulties."

Behind me, Sinon seemed to walk towards me, and there was something pointing at the center of my back. That's not a muzzle—but a fingertip. She said with a slightly forceful tone.

"However, your promise with me is another thing altogether. I'll definitely return that humiliation during the final battle yesterday with interest, so you must not let someone other than me shoot you down."

"…I understand."

I nodded my head slightly.

The biggest aim I had when I dived into GGO was to interact with «Death Gun» and solve the mystery behind the murder, but this incident now isn't just about Kikuoka Seijirou's request, but also related to me. Thinking through it calmly, I should avoid this duel with the scary sniper Sinon and achieve my aim.

But I met Sinon in this world, talked to her, and built a new relationship in this battle. I really can't ignore or belittle her actions. That's because, even in another virtual world, even if the thing attached on my waist is a light saber without a physical blade, «Kirito» is still a swordsman.

"…I'll survive until the time I fight you."

The moment I said this, the finger behind my back left my body, and a soft voice rang again.

"Thanks."

Before I could even ask why she said thanks, the elevator came to a sudden halt. After the door opened, what immediately came in from the front of the slightly dark elevator were the smell of iron and smoke—the smell of battle came over at me and engulfed me.

Chapter 10

Sinon sighed for a long while, and spent the same amount of time trying to exhale the icy air out from her virtual lungs.

She slowly tried to adjust her breathing with her heartbeat, and the green reticle[2] of hers started to expand and shrink.

She looked right in the middle of the screen. A player was moving through the bushes. He was holding a mini «Yatei» assault rifle, and though other support weapons couldn't be seen, there were all sorts of abnormal lumps on him. Perhaps he lightened his rifle to the bare minimum, and used hi-tech optical shielding and multi-layered armor against live rounds to fill up the capacity. Also, he was wearing a helmet with a face shield, and looked just like a giant boar. His name was «Shishigane», and the stats showed that he was a defensive player who focused on VIT. Although he took part in the last finals, Sinon didn't face him directly.

With a distance of more than 1,200m, even the anti-tank sniper rifle «Ultima Ratio Hecate II» can't give a fatal shot through that thick armor. Of course, it'll be different if she could hit twice consecutively, but the enemy is no slouch. Once he's hit, he would definitely hide in the shadows and not show up again. Until then, if she waits for him to show up at that position, the other players who heard the first shot would definitely gather over, and it'll be a wave of machine gun fire swarming around her like a beehive.

As Sinon was laying prone between the large rock and the shrubs, the trigger in her finger was silently muttering,

"…Come over here."

Once the distance between the target and her were within 800m, she believed that she could break through the thinner part of the armor, the face, and deal a larger amount of damage to eliminate this player from the stage.

However, Sinon's wishes didn't come true as the guy turned away and moved further away from her. He was careful enough to put heavy armor on his back too, and it could be said to be that there were no openings about him. It was a pity, but it seemed that the best choice she had would be to give up on this prey and wait for the next enemy. Just when Sinon was about to move her right eye away from the scope, she found that there was a round thing on the guy's right waist.

It was a large plasma grenade, two of them. Perhaps he was using it as another means of protection as he didn't have any support weapons. However, in this game, those «cheap and effective tools» would normally have some elements of danger to them. Sinon made herself tense and narrowed her eye that was on the scope.

She moved the scope down from the guy's back to the bottom right area, and finally aimed the crosshair at the shaking metal ball.

Inhale, exhale. She inhaled—and stopped.

As the screen of success removed all random thoughts, her body and the hand on the sniper rifle would fuse into one for a moment, and pinpoint into a fine circle. The girl naturally squeezed the trigger.

Then, there was an impact rushing through her body. Her eyes were immediately dyed white because of the sparks released by the muzzle. However, Sinon's vision immediately recovered as she looked through the scope, and through the vision that retained its color, she could see a grenade on the right waist of the man go 'bam', and she turned her face away from the gun.

"Bingo."

As she muttered, a blue explosion occured in the middle of the hill far away, and all the neighboring trees collapsed. A few seconds later, the sound of a thunderclap came over, and she didn't need to check to know that the guy's HP was reduced to zero.

At this moment, Sinon stood up, straightened her legs and carried her Hecate. As the gunshot and the muzzle spark revealed her position, the next few minutes after a snipe would be the most dangerous moment for a sniper. She quickly scanned around and then decided on the route she would take.

This path had shrubs all around, so she wouldn't be discovered easily. Also, the nearby enemies should be attracted to the large explosion of the boar guy. However, despite knowing this, Sinon didn't stop as she continued to run for more than a minute before kneeling at the base of a large dead tree and heaving a sigh. As she looked up, through the gaps between the thick layers of clouds, she could see the bloody red sun that was setting in the west.

It's been about 30 minutes since the Bullet of Bullets tournament finals started.

That boar guy just now was the second one Sinon sniped and eliminated, but the participants can't tell how many survivors were there until the satellite did its per-15-minute scan. The girl took out the thin «Satellite Scanner», activated it to show the map of the entire area and silently waited for the intel to refresh itself.

The time on the left of the screen indicated that the time in the real world was 8:30pm, and the highly detailed map showed numerous blinking lights. There were 21 of them, and in other words, 9 people had been eliminated. Sinon continued to stare at the screen as she tried to check the current scenario.

The place that became the stage of this tournament was a 10km wide isolated circular island. The north of the island was a desert, and the south was all forests and hills. Also, there was an abandoned town located in the middle of the island. Right now, Sinon was located at the southern-most hills. Moving on slightly north, there was a river flowing through, separating the hills from the forests.

Right now, there were 3 spots of lights within a 1km radius. Sinon used her fingertip to tap the names on the lights. The nearest was «Dyne», who was moving northeast 600m away. Slightly further east was «Pale Rider» who was chasing «Dyne». And finally, the last point of light which was 800m from there in the rocky hills, remaining completely still was «Lion King Richie».

Richie is equipped with the hi-firepower heavy machine gun «Vickers». Perhaps he wanted to occupy the highest point in this area and sweep any players that got near him. He used the same strategy during the last tournament, and had to withdraw as he ran out of bullets. However, he should have a counter strategy now. Either way, she could leave this enemy that wasn't moving alone.

The problem was the light points of «Dyne», who seemed to be running for his life, and «Pale Rider», who was chasing after him. Dyne wasn't just the leader of the squadron Sinon belonged to, but also a veteran who made it into the finals of the BoB 3 times. He had an assault rifle «SG550» with him, and specialized in mid-ranged combat. This person wasn't really worth respecting in terms of character, but he wasn't an enemy that should be underestimated.

And as for the Pale Rider, who chased Dyne, was one not to be taken lightly. To be honest, Sinon never met him before, and of course, never fought against him. Was he really that strong? Was it that the weapon suited the landscape? Just when Sinon felt suspicious, the satellite in the sky seemed to be gone, and all the lights that were on the map were flickering. The Intel would disappear in about another 10 seconds.

Sinon raised her hand in reflex, ready to count the 18 dots that were far away. But just when her index finger was about to touch the screen, that hand clenched into a fist. That's because she noticed that she was looking for a certain special name.

"…Why should I even bother, with a guy like that."

Sinon muttered softly. There was no need for her to worry about that kind of guy—whether that despicable light saber user «Kirito» was alive or not. Right now, she should focus on the prey that was entering the Hecate's range. If Kirito entered the range, she should just aim, fire and end his life immediately without any feelings.

The flickering lights finally disappeared silently. Sinon placed the terminal back into her pouch and again ran through the forest.

Below her was a gradual hill, and opposite it was a lush forest. Right now, Dyne and Pale Rider were in a deep part of the forest, moving from Sinon's right to her left. Both of them should be aiming for the river that splits the area in half and the bridge that spreads across the river. The cautious Dyne must be trying to avoid a high risk forest battle and chose to fight on a bridge where the range of vision was great to take on the pursuing Pale Rider.

Sinon was closer to the bridge than them. If she ran off now, she should be able to reach a sniping position first. She wanted to watch their battle from there and snipe the victor once his guard was down.

Readying the Hecate on her right shoulder, Sinon lowered her body and ran through the forest again.

The girl managed to pass through the red tea-colored hilly region safely, and a deep red band of reflected light swooped into Sinon's vision, as she swooped under the final bush there.

It was a river. Flowing out from the southern hills, it grandly snaked its way through the middle of the entire map as it headed towards the north before

disappearing into her clouded view of the distant ruins of that abandoned city, far away.

On the opposite side of the river was a forest that had lots of old trees, and slightly below the trees, she could see a meandering rocky path. The path reached the river 200m north of where Sinon was sneaking, and linked to a simple metal bridge. At this moment, those two players should be running down the path—

Her intuition seemed to be correct since, a figure came running out from the shadows of the large old trees that were growing on the way between the path and the metal bridge. Sinon hurriedly readied the Hecate on the floor and brought her eyes over before she even lined her eyes on the rip-up cover of the scope.

That body was wearing a woodland patterned clothing, and his chin could be seen from below his helmet. Also, the SIG assault rifle confirmed that this was Dyne. He ran smoothly down the path like a veteran, and after leaving the forest for a few seconds. He quickly ran 50m down the metal bridge, over to the side where Sinon was hiding and immediately got down on the floor, proning.

"…I see."

Sinon muttered with some respect. In this situation, he could attack the enemy who wanted to run across the metal bridge. However, he was still too careless. To an enemy who may be hiding on the riverside, he showed his back in a completely defenseless manner.

"You have to watch your back no matter when it is, Dyne."

Sinon muttered as the crosshairs lined itself and caught that somewhat rough-looking face. Now she could take direct action without even waiting for Dyne and Pale Rider to fight. Though Pale Rider would notice Sinon's existence, he had to cross the bridge if he wanted to force his way. Sinon was only 200m away from the metal bridge, and even if the enemy ran with all he got, she had the confidence that it'll be a sure-kill hit.

--Of course, I'll just be sorry to those who were watching live from the gallery.

Sinon thought as she silently placed her finger on the Hecate's trigger, but at the next moment…

There was an icy chill behind her.

There was also someone behind her.

--Idiot! I forgot to watch my back because I was focused on sniping!

As Sinon was screaming this in her head, she quickly moved her right hand away from the Hecate. She turned 180 degrees like her body was a spring and used her left hand to pull out her support weapon, the «MP7» sub-machine gun. While doing all that, her mind let out flashes of interrupted thoughts.

--But how could there be anyone behind me? There was only Lion King Richie when I checked the «Satellite Scanner» a few minutes ago, wasn't it? That guy can't have possibly ran down the mountain. And I can't possibly not notice the enemy's footsteps if he ran in with a heavy machine gun. Speaking of which, it's practically impossible for any enemy other than Richie to get behind me in such a short time. What's going on—who is it—

Even though she was really surprised, Sinon reached the MP7 right behind her, and placed the black muzzle right in front of her. Of course, she wasn't paying that much attention to things; she couldn't believe that someone had gotten the jump on her.

Right now, she couldn't dodge this assault. They would soon use up all their bullets in their magazines to reduce each other's HP—Sinon got ready to squeeze the trigger after preparing herself for this.

But just when she was about to pull the trigger and fire the bullet…

The attacker muttered softly as he raised his right hand, looking like he wanted to stop Sinon,

"Wait!"

"Uehh…!?"

Sinon widened her eyes and turned to look from the muzzle to the enemy's face.

She immediately saw that long waist-length glamorous black hair, and the white tender skin even when under the sunset, and the long narrow eyes that were sparkling.

Her arch-enemy Kirito seemed to be half-sprawled on Sinon, wielding the FiveSeven pistol with his left hand and aiming at her.

After realizing the current situation, Sinon's heart experienced several feelings at once, all combined together in a blaze. She forgot the muzzle in front of her eyes and subconsciously gritted her teeth, throwing a malicious look, and moved to fire the MP7 in her left hand.

But Kirito again said with a cool voice that made Sinon stop exerting the force on her fingers.

"Hold on. I have a proposal."

"…What's there to propose in this situation…"

Sinon argued back with a soft voice that was filled with killing intent.

"What's there to propose and compromise in this situation!? We're only waiting to see who dies first!"

"I could have shot first if I wanted to shoot!"

Kirito's words were abnormally tense, causing Sinon to shut up. It felt that there was something more troubling to him than this faceoff at gunpoint.

And though she wasn't happy about it, what Kirito said was right. If he could get near easily, he could have back-stabbed her by firing bullets or using the lightsaber.

"…"

Facing Sinon, who was forced to remain silent, Kirito again continued to speak softly,

"I don't want those two to hear us shooting at each other."

Kirito's eyes immediately turned to look behind Sinon, at the metal bridge where another battle was about to begin.

"Uehh…? What do you mean…"

"I want to watch that battle on the bridge until the winner is decided. Please don't take any action before then."

"…Watch? And what do you intend to do after that? Are you going to say something stupid like, "let's start attacking each other" after that?"

"We need to monitor the situation…but I should be leaving then, so I won't attack you."

"But I may snipe you from behind, you know?"

"That can't be helped. Please bare with me. It's starting!"

As Kirito anxiously turned to look at the metal bridge, he actually put the FiveSeven in his left hand down. Even though the enemy was pointing a submachine-gun right in the middle of his forehead, he still placed the handgun back into his holster.

Though she was angry, Sinon felt that it couldn't be helped, and her shoulders relaxed just like that.

If she exerted a little more force on the finger that was on the trigger, the 24 4.6mm MP7 bullets could shoot out all of Kirito's HP. However, Sinon had already viewed Kirito as her biggest enemy, so she was really unwilling to end her fight against him in such a desultory manner.

If it's Kirito, maybe he can dodge the Hecate's snipe without even a trajectory, Sinon had already planned for this and thought of all the ways that she could fight him head on. If they had to fight, of course she would hope for Kirito and herself to be the last two standing amongst the 30 players and then fight an intense deathmatch that would use all their heart and soul.

"…Will you fight me properly if we do this over?"

"Yeah."

Kirito nodded his head, and Sinon put down her submachine gun after watching his eyes for half a second. She knew that it wouldn't be likely, but to prevent Kirito from suddenly attacking her, she still didn't move her finger away from the trigger. However, Kirito himself immediately relaxed his entire body and proned himself in the bush beside Sinon. He took out mini-binoculars from his belt pouch and started watching the battle.

This attitude of not even paying attention to consider her a potential threat at all made her angry and reluctant at the same time. Why must this guy watch someone else fight? Speaking of which, when did he appear? There wasn't Kirito's name within 1km around her when she checked the «Satellite Scanner» a few minutes ago.

However, Sinon still swallowed her doubts back in and placed the MP7 on her left waist. She then carried the Hecate with both hands and used the scope to watch the two people who were fighting.

On the long metal bridge, Sinon could still see Dyne in a prone position near her. The SG550 that was stuck on his face wasn't moving at all, and this uninterrupted concentration of his showed that he wasn't someone to be underestimated. Of course, the Pale Rider who forced Dyne into such a tough situation couldn't possibly appear easily from the forest across from him.

"…The battle you're so looking forward to may not happen."

Sinon muttered at Kirito, who was beside her, in a mocking manner.

"Dyne won't remain proned there forever. Once that guy gets ready to move, I'll snipe him first."

"In that case, you can take action…no, hang on."

Kirito's answer was tense all of a sudden. Sinon moved her eye away from the scope on reflex and turned to look at the metal bridge with her naked eyes.

At this moment, a figure suddenly appeared from the path that was deep within the thick forest.

It was a tall and skinny player, wearing mysterious blue and white camouflage clothing. Since he had a black helmet on, they couldn't see his face. That person was armed with only the light «ArmaLite AR 17» shotgun. This guy should be — no, he's definitely the «Pale Rider» who was chasing Dyne.

Dyne, who was lying on the other side of the bridge, immediately went tense on his shoulders, and this abnormal atmosphere spread to Sinon who was far away. In contrast, she couldn't feel any pressure from Pale Rider's standing position. He didn't seem to be scared of that SIG in Dyne's hands as he merely crossed the bridge easily.

"…That guy is strong…"

Sinon couldn't help but say that, and beside her, Kirito suddenly moved his body slightly. Sinon glanced at him for a while and found that the side-face that looked just like a girl was giving off a very tense vibe. In other words,

Kirito was watching that Pale Rider? Even though it was Sinon's first time seeing this certain player's name and appearance, his actions showed that he did possess a certain amount of ability.

GGO had the «Bullet Line» assist prediction ability that didn't exist in real life. It's not easy getting near an enemy with a fully-automatic machine gun. Normally speaking, there would be obstacles for the person to hide behind, so he could run from one cover to the next, using lateral movements to close in on the enemy.

However, Pale Rider merely stepped onto the metal bridge in a defenseless manner casually. There was nothing, no landscape or objects to block the bullets. Even Dyne, who escaped to create this situation could only remain prone on the floor, and a slight doubt could be seen on his back.

However, Dyne was a leader of a squadron for quite some time, so his experience made him abandon his inner doubt. A second later, his SG550 assault rifle fired with the sturdy sound that fit a Swiss machine, and immediately spread throughout the river surface.

However, Pale Rider himself dodged those numerous 5.5mm bullets that were fired over in a manner Sinon didn't expect. He actually ran to a cable that was supporting the bridge and used the left hand to climb up. Dyne hurriedly tried to aim the gun at him, but it's tough for a person in a prone position to aim at an enemy above; as he missed the second shooting, Pale Rider himself used the recoil of the ropes to jump onto the bridge at a position that's rather near Dyne.

"A STR type, using light equipment and boasting 3-dimensional mobility…his skills' points are rather high too."

As Sinon muttered, Dyne got up to show that he wouldn't be tricked a second time and squeezed the trigger for the third time. However, this attack of his was anticipated by Pale Rider. Thus there was a little gap in the firing line and the ground, that blue and white profile immediately rushed in without falling by using his left hand to support the ground and doing a barrel roll forward. He was only 20cm away from Dyne when he got up.

"Damn you…!"

Dyne let out the familiar cursing and tried to quickly change the 30-bullet magazine that was empty. However…

The ArmaLite in Pale Rider's right hand let out a silent flash.

Under such a distance, the bullets of a shotgun couldn't miss completely. Dyne immediately fell backwards as the special effects lighting spread all over him. But remarkably, he didn't stop as he reloaded and got ready to put his gun at this face—however, there was a second gunshot.

Pale Rider again got near and shot for the second time to cause Dyne to lose his balance. This was the terrifying part about this weapon called the shotgun; It causes a high delay beside ordinary damage, allowing people to be continuously attacked helplessly.

--There was no need to bring the SIG to the face since the muzzle flash, which is fired from the waist, was extremely powerful.

However, Sinon's thoughts couldn't spread to Dyne's brain, and it was too late. Pale Rider continued to close in and slowly reloaded the AR17 before squeezing the trigger right in front of Dyne for the 3rd time. The 12 gauge shell exploded, releasing a rain of bullets and bringing Dyne's remaining HP to zero.

Dyne, who was on the floor lifelessly, had the large word [Dead] in red on him as it slowly spun. Now he's eliminated from the finals. He wouldn't be able to log out during this time as it was to prevent players from exchanging information in the real world. This «corpse» could only watch the live broadcast in his conscious state until the match ends.

"That blue guy is amazing..."

Beside her, Kirito said with a soft voice. Sinon was subconsciously about to nod her head in response, and immediately pricked her eyebrows on hearing what he said next,

"…Is that guy…one of the guys we talked about on the list…?"

Sinon felt extremely suspicious, but immediately remembered that «Pale Rider» was one of the three players Kirito was worried about. In other words, Pale Rider could be that target. Both of them tried to kill each other in that VRMMO game Kirito played before, and that game's name was—no, maybe it's that one that became infamous...

At this moment, Sinon forced herself to stop thinking.

Kirito should have his own problems too, but those were his own problems. Nobody else should get in the way, not should they bear responsibility for it.

Sinon seemed like she wanted to shake off this little doubt and turned off the safe of the Hecate before saying softly and simply,

"I'm going to snipe that guy."

Without waiting for Kirito's response, she placed her finger on the trigger. After Pale Rider eliminated Dyne with an exciting attack, he left the bridge and was ready to head north. Sinon's crosshair immediately caught sight of his skinny back, and considered the wind direction and distance before readying herself.

At this moment, Kirito finally answered with a hoarse voice,

"Ahh…I understand. But, if he's that guy…"

--So what if it's that guy? You're telling me that in less than 300m with his back turned, he could dodge my sniping specialty the «first shot without a bullet line»?

"…Stop joking around."

Sinon merely moved her lips to answer Kirito and began to pull the trigger without hesitation—

But at this moment…

Sinon saw an unbelievable sight in her scope.

A little bullet exited the right shoulder of Pale Rider's blue and white camouflage, and this tall and skinny guy was knocked to the right like he was knocked aside from the bullet that hit him.

""Ahh…!""

Sinon and Kirito, who was watching the scene with his binoculars from the left, shouted out at the same time.

Though surprised, Sinon still focused on her hearing instinctively. Of course, this was to check the gunshot that sniped Pale Rider, where it came from and the sound quality. However…

No matter how Sinon pricked her ears, all she could hear was the dry wind and the water flowing in the river.

"…Did I miss it…?"

Sinon muttered, and Kirito, who seemed to be thinking about that, silently responded,

"No, I didn't hear anything as well. What's going on…?"

"The only thing I can think of…is that it was a laser rifle that lets out a very soft sound…or a live weapon with a suppressor. However…"

"Wh..what?…?"

Sinon glanced aside and stared at the puzzled Kirito, thinking how much stuff must she teach him and started explaining.

"It's a muffler. An equipment that's placed in front of a gunbarrel to suppress the sound of gunfire."

"So, so it's a silencer…"

"You can call it that. Anyway, a sniper rifle that's equipped with this can suppress the sound of gunfire to a certain extent. But this thing will affect accuracy, shooting range, and is rather expensive."

"I see…"

Kirito nodded his head as his eyes glanced slightly at the tip of Sinon's Hecate II. The front of the gunbarrel was merely a muzzle brake, and even an amateur like Kirito knew that that wasn't a suppressor. Sinon added on before the other party wanted to say something,

"This wasn't to save money, but because those things don't fit my style."

Fuun.

She snorted and again looked through the scope. Pale Rider, who collapsed on the floor, didn't look like he was about to get up, but that wasn't a fatal blow. If it was, there would be a red 'dead' tag on him like the one on Dyne, who was slightly further away from him. He's alive, so why didn't he run away or fight back'—

Also, there were other doubts as well. 10 minutes ago, on the map of the «Satellite Scan», Sinon checked that there wasn't anyone else within 1km.

In other words, the mysterious sniper shot Pale Rider from a rather far distance. But in that case, the enemy would be using a rather large caliber to snipe him. In GGO, the larger the gunbarrel, the weaker the effect of the suppressor, and the accuracy and shooting range would be even more affected. However, there was no gunshot heard just now, and she couldn't understand why.

As she was thinking, Sinon suddenly remembered that she was wondering about the same thing about that player who was right beside her, and felt that it was time to ask this. She turned around and said softly,

"…Speaking of which, Kirito, where did you appear from? You weren't around these hills 10 minutes ago on the satellite scan."

"Eh…? I was tailing that guy Pale Rider from about 500m away, so it should show up on the screen…no, ahh, I got it."

"What is it?"

"Speaking of which, I should have been wading in the river 10 minutes ago. Maybe it's because I was hiding underwater that the satellite didn't discover me…"

—YOU, YOU SWAM THROUGH THE RIVER!?

Sinon tried her best to hold back her voice, and didn't shout out.

It's known that the rivers and lakes in this game weren't some forbidden zone, and they won't die if they dropped inside. However, the HP will continue to drop in the water, and the player won't be able to swim at will due to the weight of the equipment on the body. It's practically impossible for any player to swim over that wide river except for those frogmen-type players with the breathing equipment.

"How, how did you do that…?"

After she finally raised this question with much difficulty, Kirito himself simply shrugged his shoulder and answered,

"Of course I removed all my equipment for the time being. All VRMMO that uses the specs of «The Seed» can remove their equipment in their personal window back into the item box. There's no need to carry it, right?"

"…"

Perhaps this would be a suitable example to describe someone who was so shocked that she couldn't make a response. Forget about swimming, the boldness of even removing all the weapons and armor in the middle of a battlefield was extremely unbelievable.

"…People would definitely be happy to see your character in underwear like that."

"Arre, isn't the live telecast only showing the battle scenes?"

Seeing Kirito give that dont-try-and-fool-me line, Sinon merely snorted coldly and answered,

"…Anyway, so the «Satellite Scanner» can't catch people who are underwater. I'll remember that. But, the Pale Rider you swam through the river just to trail was strong, but not some outstanding player. He's unable to get up after getting hit by a bullet, looks like he's…"

Just when Sinon was about to say 'not going to survive', she was interrupted by Kirito, who again raised his binoculars.

"No…I don't think he was so scared that he was unable to get up…look at him, isn't there some strange light effect on his avatar…?"

"Eh…"

Sinon hurriedly increased the range of her scope. Though it was hard to tell as the sunset was too strong, the blue and white camouflage of the Pale Rider did have blueish-sparks all over him. Sinon did see that effect before, and that was—

"An…an electric stun bullet…!?"

"Wha, what's that?"

"Like the name, it's a unique bullet that would cause high voltage of electricity once it hits a target. But it needs a rather large caliber rifle to load it, and even a single bullet is very expensive, so they're barely ever used in PvP. That's a bullet that's used when a party hunts a large Mob."

In fact, as Sinon was explaining, the sparks that immobilized Pale Rider started to turn pale. A few more seconds, and the effect would disappear. His HP shouldn't wear down because of that, but now she really didn't know why the enemy would do such a difficult snipe—

"—!"

Sinon couldn't tell whether that little tremor was from her or from Kirito beside her.

200m north from where both of them were hidden was that large metal bridge that extends to both east and west. On the west side of the bridge was Dyne, who was dead. Pale Rider was knocked down by a stun bullet that came from the forest on the east side, and was now 5m north from him. However, he was about ready to get up.

Right between the bodies of Pale Rider and Dyne, a black profile came out from a shadow of a supporting metal pillar.

On first glance, that didn't look like a person (player). The avatar was completely covered with a mysterious presence. After trying her best to look at it, Sinon finally understood the reason why she couldn't see him. That person was covered with a grey hooded mantle, and that hood was fluttering irregularly like some little thin material because of the wind. That was a Ghillie Suit a sniper wears. No, it should be called a «Ghillie Mantle». But—

"…Since when was he waiting there…?"

Sinon subconsciously muttered. That mantle guy should be the one who shot Pale Rider. However, since when did he move out of the forest and cross the bridge? Even if he had a Ghillie Mantle that had outstanding camouflage ability, he would definitely be discovered if he moved on the metal bridge without anyone noticing. Or did he swim through the river like Kirito? But if that happened, she definitely never saw him summon a window and control his equipped figure.

But at the next moment, the next stunning revelation that shook all of Sinon's doubts aside occurred.

The tattered mantle moved forward, and then revealed the main weapon that was hidden under the body in his right hand.

"—«Silent Assassin»."

She let out a panting like voice.

It was a large sniper rifle that was about as long as the Hecate. Though the gun itself was slimmer than the Hecate, the several bolt holes that passes

through the mechanisms, the highly-advanced grip that had a thumb handle and the dark-grey gun body that was polished all gave a bone-chilling feeling. However, the most unique specialty about it was the large suppressor that's attached to the tip of the gun barrel. No, it wasn't right to call it installed, but rather, it was a sniper rifle that was designed with the intention to use the suppressor.

Its actual name was «Accuracy International L115A3», and it used .338 inch Lapua Magnum bullets. Though the firepower was far inferior to the .50BMG the Hecate II had, the L115 wasn't an anti-tank sniper gun. One can tell from the fact that this was originally equipped with a silencer that was created to snipe humans. As the largest range was more than 2,000m, those who were shot by the bullet couldn't see the shooter, and couldn't hear the gunshot before dying. Thus, people gave it a nickname—the «Silent Assassin».

Sinon did hear of this terrifying sniper gun in GGO, but she had never actually seen it before. Speaking of which, she never heard of a sniper who could work on his own other than herself. However, that tattered mantle was able to shoot from deep within the forest across the river and shoot Pale Rider. It's impossible to accomplish such a shot without enough skill, concentration, control and heartbeat.

—Who is that guy?

Sinon instinctively checked the watch on her left hand. It's now 8.40pm. There's still 5 minutes before the third «Satellite Scan», and in this situation, things just feel extremely long.

The mysterious mantle in her scope gave a deathly presence as he strapped the L115 on his right shoulder. Sinon widened her eyes to see if there was any tag or affiliated squadron, but there wasn't anything out of the ordinary other than the muzzle and the dark-grey hood. As Sinon watched on, the tattered mantle seemed to glide as he walked towards the Pale Rider who fell onto the floor.

Pale Rider, who was able to take down Dyne seemingly without a scratch, was a player who did give off a strong presence. Sinon never heard of his name before, but in the north mainland that was far away, he should be famous like that «Behemoth» who used that minigun. However, when seeing both of them like this, the existence of the tattered mantle was more shocking. When she got her Hecate for the first time, Sinon once took down a large boss-like monster alone, and the tattered mantle gave Sinon chills that were larger than the ones she got from that monster — no, it gave more chills than that monster.

But as she realized the ability of the tattered mantle, Sinon had a question she just couldn't understand.

Even though he had such a rare gun and highly-skilled sniper technique, why did he use a stun bullet instead of real bullets? Pale Rider was lightly equipped, so a .338 Laqua should have a chance to kill him if it was the head or the heart. However, this tactic is understandable if he wanted to numb someone before sniping someone more accurately. However, the tattered mantle player showed up from the forest away shooting the first stun bullet and walked towards Pale Rider which had lots of HP, revealing his own position. Wouldn't that highly difficult snipe be completely meaningless.

The anxiety that came with being unable to predict the enemy's intent made Sinon bite her lips.

Speaking of which, Kirito, who was beside her, went quiet. Even though Sinon wanted to check the situation with him, she hesitated over whether she should turn her eyes away from the tattered mantle, and could only look through the scope of the Hecate.

The tattered mantle guy moved in front of Pale Rider and reached his right hand into the hood while carrying the L115. Is he going to finish off with his support weapon? Sinon thought. Even a mini-assault rifle can wear Pale Rider's HP to zero at such a close range—

"…Eh…"

But Sinon again lets out a shocked voice.

What the mantle took out was a handgun. As the shadows caused by the sunset were too great and that it was immediately covered by the body, Sinon couldn't tell what sort of gun it was, but the silhouette was enough to indicate that it was an ordinary automatic pistol.

A shot from a handgun wouldn't cause less damage than an assault rifle, but even after pressing the trigger for consecutive times, it couldn't fire automatically, and will need lots of time before it can deplete an enemy's HP. Right now, Pale Rider was lying on the floor, and was about to recover from his numbness. Once he could move, he'll definitely fire the shotgun in his right hand. At that time, the one who would be dead would be this tattered mantle.

Even so, this mysterious player was just standing there, waiting for the night wind to blow his Ghillie mantle. There wasn't any sense of anxiety or wavering in him. He continued to point his right hand at Pale Rider, who was lying on the floor, and then raised his hand out from the mantle. That hand wasn't holding anything. It's unknown what the mantle guy was about to do as he placed his left finger on the forehead of his hood. Then, he moved to the chest, and finally, left and right.

This action was the so-called Cross-sign — was he planning to pray for an enemy who was about to die? But he shouldn't have much time left to do this. Does he think that he could dodge the shotgun at such a close distance? Or rather, was he a cocky person who just got lucky in getting a rare gun…?

The unnecessary questions made Sinon bite her lips anxiously. Suddenly, a soft voice came in to her left ear.

"…Sinon, shoot."

It was Kirito's voice. This short sentence had a sense of urgency she never felt before. Sinon couldn't help but ask,

"Eh? Shoot who?"

"Shoot that mantle guy!! Please, just shoot! Shoot before that guy takes action!!"

That abnormally anxious voice actually caused Sinon to exert force on her right index finger which was on the trigger of the Hecate. Sinon would normally grumble about it, but right now, she aimed her crosshair on the back of that mantle. She predicted the wind direction and humidity through the surrounding dust effect and slightly adjusted her angle. As she exerted force on the finger that's on the trigger, the green bullet trajectory immediately covered the enemy.

Logically, Sinon should wait for the winner to be decided between both of them. If she attacked the mantle now, the Pale Rider will recover from his numbness and definitely escape into the bushes on the left, and Sinon wouldn't have the chance to snipe him.

But even after knowing that, Sinon didn't release the strength that's exerted on the finger. For some reason, she had a feeling that she had to hit no matter what. She stopped her breathing, letting the imaginary cold air stop in her chest. That icy feeling could make her heart calm down. *Bekun*…*bekun*…just when the reticle shrank and the pulse moved as it gathered in a small circle—

A gunshot.

The large muzzled brake let out a large flame that looked like a fire dragon.

There were only 300m between her and the target, so she couldn't miss. Sinon could even see an illusion where that avatar had a large hole there.

—However,

In fact, the moment Sinon squeezed the trigger, the upper body of the mantle player bent backwards like a phantom that didn't materialize. The sure-kill bullet grazed past his chest and opened a huge hole further away.

"Wha…"

Sinon was unable to say anything and had an uncertain feeling. She found that he turned his head towards her location, and faced her from deep under the mantle. That heinous face did give a smile, and Sinon subconsciously gasped.

"Tha…that guy, he knew that we were here…right from the beginning…"

"How is it possible…! He never looked at us once before!"

On hearing Kirito's similarly shocked voice, Sinon shook her head slightly and said,

"It's impossible to dodge this without seeing the bullet line. In other words, he started noticing me from a certain time and checked through the system…"

As she said this, her right hand automatically loaded the next round into the Hecate. Sinon again got ready to snipe, but started to hesitate. Facing

this enemy who had such a response speed, there's a 99% chance that this bullet line will be dodged. She could fire all the 4 bullets in her magazine, but if she used them all, it'll be easy for the enemy to counterattack. What should I do…what should I do.

The mantle guy brought his body back forward as if he saw Sinon's short hesitation.

He again lined the automatic pistol in his right hand at Pale Rider, and flicked the hammer with his thumb. His left hand was supporting beside the grip, and then he calmly squeezed the trigger.

A flash appeared. After a few seconds, Sinon could hear a dry gunshot in her ears.

"Ahh…!"

Kirito groaned, seemingly afraid of something.

Of course, the bullet hit the center of Pale Rider. It was a physical damage, but anyone in this world wouldn't be dead from a 9mm bullet round immediately no matter which part he's hit in. Also, Pale Rider should have at least 90% of his HP. But for some reason, the mantle guy stopped attacking. He just kept his hands on his gun and stood there. He knew that Sinon was aiming at him, but never had the intention to look for cover. He probably had the belief that he could dodge any bullet.

1 second, 2 seconds, 3 seconds—

At that moment, the stun bullet effect that immobilized Pale Rider finally vanished.

The guy who was dressed in the blue and white camouflage suit then jumped up and quickly raised that AR17 shotgun with breathtaking speed and placed it at the chest of the mantle guy. That was definitely zero distance, and all the pellets could enter the heart of the mantle guy. Its power was different from a handgun, and the mantle guy could be killed in one hit.

Sinon and Kirito, that was laying beside her, and the audience in the entire GGO world and real world who were watching this live telecast should be watching this with their eyes widened.

The counterattack gunshot—was never heard.

What replaced it was the slight sound of a heavy object landing. It was the AR17 in Pale Rider's right hand dropping on the deep tea-colored sandy ground.

Then, Pale Rider knelt down like his joints were destroyed like a puppet and tilted right slowly before lying completely on the floor.

From Sinon's position, she could see the lips under the helmet of Pale Rider. He opened his mouth, seemingly making a silent cry and also looked like he was desperately gasping for air.

He suddenly raised his left hand in a rather weak motion, grabbing the center of his chest. And at the next moment—

The body that was wearing blue and white camouflage seemed to be surrounded by light that looked like static and suddenly disappeared.

Finally, what was left of him was a little line of light displaying [DISCONNECTION], but soon it faded into the sunset and disappeared.

"…What, was that?"

A few seconds later, Sinon finally managed to say these words.

The mantle player merely fired a handgun at Pale Rider. At this moment, Pale Rider should have some HP left. Then, Pale Rider was released from his stunned state and got ready to fight back with the shotgun. But just when he was about to fire, the circuits went faulty unfortunately, kicking him out from the game.

If there was a need to explain what just happened before her eyes, this would be the most logical explanation.

But how did it end up disconnected with such perfect timing? And, more than being lucky, that mantle guy who nearly got a huge reversal seemed to know that this disconnection would happen. No, rather than that—

It felt like he was able to kick Pale Rider out from the game through his own will.

That was impossible. It's impossible to interfere with other players' network connection from within the game.

However, the mantle guy didn't seem to be shocked by Pale Rider's disappearance at all as he merely kept his left hand back into the mantle.

Then, he again raised the handgun in his right hand and pointed it to a certain point. Sinon immediately knew what that was. That was the video camera that was showing the live broadcast of the tournament. The tournament set up a light-colored thing in the sky to show the player that he was being filmed. In other words, that was a declaration of victory to all the audience. However, what was he declaring? Just now, the battle he had with pale Rider was a forfeit because of a network failure, so it wasn't a manner that's worth bragging. Or—was the disappearance just now the real victory to the mantle guy? In other words…

"That guy…can disconnect the other players from the server…?"

Sinon muttered with a hoarse voice.

And beside her, Kirito seemed to be daydreaming as he answered,

"Wrong…that's not it. It's not just an ordinary power."

"What's ordinary? That's a huge problem! How can he use such a cheating method? What is the operating company Zasker doing…?"

"WRONG!"

Kirito suddenly grabbed Sinon's left shoulder tightly. Sinon wanted to shake him off instinctively, but the following words made the girl freeze.

"That guy didn't kick the player out from the server. He killed him. That Pale Rider just now…that real life player controlling Pale Rider is dead!!"

"…You…"

What are you saying?

Sinon was about to say that, but what Kirito said next made Sinon swallow her words again.

"So I'm right. That guy…that guy's «Death gun»—«Death Gun»!"

Sinon heard of this name before. After the vague knowledge floated up from deep within her memories of knowledge, she then said.

"…Death…Gun. Is it about that weird rumor…? That someone shot the winner of the last tournament «Zekushiido», and «Usujio Tarako» who got a high ranking position, in a pub on the streets and the plaza, and they never logged in again afterwards…"

"That's right…"

Kirito nodded his head and then looked at Sinon's face. Those large and black eyes had a strong impact and fear in them that Sinon had never seen before. Also, he was shaking because of a certain feeling.

"I felt…that it wasn't possible. Yesterday, while waiting at the dome, I met him and still continued to deny this possibility. But I have no need to doubt it anymore…that guy really used a certain way to kill players in the real world. In fact, the corpses of «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako» were discovered recently…"

"…"

—How did you know about this? Who are you? What's your relationship with that mantle guy…?

Before she was shocked by the fact that «Death Gun» really existed. Sinon's heart was already confused by this person called Kirito, and this made her really unable to catch what was going on.

Of course, Sinon still couldn't believe this honestly. Killing someone in the real world from a game? That's too far-fetched…and wouldn't this be paradoxical? If things inside the game affected the lives in the real world, that wouldn't be a game anymore. However, on seeing Kirito give a serious expression, voice and gaze that didn't look like what a virtual avatar could make, she just felt that she couldn't laugh this off. Who—who exactly in the world are you…

Sinon's mind was all confused and could only remain silent. At this moment, Kirito, who maintained a sharp gaze as he continued, finally managed to turn his eyes away from her to the metal bridge, and Sinon looked over too as if she was led by him.

The mysterious mantle guy who made Pale Rider «log out» put the handgun that was aimed at the camera down and turned to look at Dyne who was in the south. Dyne, who had the [dead] tag on his abdomen, was still logged in, but unable to talk, and unable to make any expression, so nobody could tell what sort of thoughts he had about the strange battle that went on beside him.

The mantle guy placed his handgun back into the holster, strapped up his L115 back on his shoulder with a shyari sound, and started walking to Dyne. Was he going to attack this «corpse» of Dyne? Sinon couldn't help

but gasp on thinking about this, and Kirito seemed to be thinking the same thing as his slender body twitched slightly, looking like he was about to rush out from the woods.

But perhaps Dyne—was lucky as the mantle guy didn't take out his automatic pistol, but walked past Dyne and moved onto the metal bridge. He didn't cross it, but disappeared behind the thick big pillar like how he appeared. He should be walking on the slightly shallow river. Though they couldn't see him now, that position can only lead him north or south down the river. If she start to move now, she would definitely see him again—…

"…Still hasn't appeared yet…"

Kirito muttered. Sinon still nodded her head. Even after 10 seconds, the mantle guy hadn't shown up. This meant that he was still hiding in the shadows behind the bridge. It seemed like he was wary about Sinon's sniper rifle.

At this moment, a slightly ringing vibration could be felt from the left wrist, and Sinon then checked her watch. 8.44pm 50 seconds. There were 10 seconds left before the 3rd «Satellite Scanner». Sinon pulled the device out from her waist pouch and watched the screen.

"Kirito, watch the bridge. I'll use this chance to check that guy's name."

"Got it."

On hearing his immediate reply, Sinon waited for the map to refresh itself. There's still 3 seconds…2, 1, the scan started. The spy satellite of the galactic war age flew through the sky, and scanned through the entire surface without letting a single spot slip by. Its electronic eye could easily read through mini cover. There was no other way to hide except by hiding in a cave or swimming into the water like Kirito.

PaPaPaPaa.... After a few beats, new flashing lights appeared on the screen. Lion King Richie was still camping on the peak of the hill far south. He wouldn't be able to get down the hill before the tournament ends.

About 800m north of him, the two blinking spots hiding between the forest and the hills were Kirito and Sinon. To the players who were far away from them, they would definitely think that they were fighting at close range. They shouldn't be able to expect that they were pushed side by side, hiding in the bushes. Of course, Sinon was praying that the other players wouldn't know that.

And 200m north, there was a rather light glow, showing Dyne, who was dead. A little north, and it would be Pale Rider's light spot, but the map didn't show it. And at the east side of Dyne, the light spot of that mantle guy under the bridge was—

"Eh… Not-not there?"

Sinon said with surprise as she stared hard at the high definition screen.

But no matter how she continued to look, the surroundings of the metal bridge only showed Dyne's light spot. The mantle guy had already moved somewhere else. But if he moved up the river, she should be able to notice it. Sinon then panicked as she wondered what was going on, but immediately started thinking again.

There was only one possibility she could think of. He used the same method as Kirito and swam underwater to avoid the satellite scanner. In that case, that means…

"…There's a chance."

On hearing Sinon mutter, Kirito frowned. Sinon glanced at him and then quickly explained the entire situation.

"That mantle guy didn't appear on the screen, so he's definitely hiding at the bottom of the river. In that case, he should have removed all his equipment. Even if he wants to get up the river, it'll take at least 10 seconds for him to summon his window and fully equip himself. We just need to attack him…"

"What if it's just a handgun? He should be able to move if he's carrying such light arms, right?"

Before she even finished, Kirito raised the same doubt. Sinon could only reply reluctantly,

"I've never tried this before, but if the STR and VIT values are high enough, it should be…but even so, we should be able to overpower someone with a handgun easily…"

"NO!"

Kirito suddenly stopped suppressing his voice and shouted, forcefully grabbing Sinon's left hand.

"You just saw it, right? That guy's black handgun made Pale Rider disappear! It may be real death if you're hit!"

Sinon couldn't look away from the glowing black eyes of Kirito. She forced herself not to look away, shook her head, and answered,

"…But I still can't believe that there will be real death resulting from being shot in a game….Uun, or rather, if this were real, that mantle guy could kill anyone on his own will, right? How is that possible…I really can't believe it. How can such a person exist in GGO…in a VRMMO…"

That's right. Even in the wilderness of «Gun Gale Online», where killing intent was everywhere, it was still «a kind world» to Sinon/Shino.

This world didn't have any real evil intent or killing intent. The reason why they replaced communication with bullets and smoke was simply because they wanted to surpass their peers, to be stronger than anyone else. In this world, no matter how much they shot or how many bullets they take, they wouldn't lose a single drop of blood. Also, they would definitely not feel any pain, injury or any real damages. Thus, even though they would feel remorse over losing a battle, they wouldn't behold any grudges against the enemy. Like the tough battle before. Sinon's entire left leg was blown away by the minigun of that Behemoth, and the Behemoth was shot through by Sinon's Hecate. But after that battle, Sinon was just left with self-confidence, reflection and the respect for that strong Behemoth. She believed that the Behemoth would feel the same way about her.

It's because of that that Sinon decided on this GGO world, a cushioning mechanism that protected her from that weak her in the real world and that terrifying memory. She believed that if she continued to fight here, the confidence she built in the virtual world would one day surpass that grudge that anguished her so much in the real world.

There couldn't be any real malice in a VRMMO, or else it wouldn't be a virtual world. Wouldn't it become the dark reality Sinon always feared and was running from…

"I…really couldn't believe that there was really a VRMMO player who would really kill someone besides PKing."

On hearing Sinon murmur—

Kirito answered with a thoroughly pained voice,

"But they really exist. That mantle guy…«Death Gun», he used to kill a lot of people in that VRMMO I was in before. Even after knowing that the enemy would really die, he still swung his sword. It was like how he shot Pale Rider just now, and...I..."

At this moment, Kirito stopped talking, looked down and let go of Sinon's hand.

However, by piecing together those heavy words and the conversation she had with Kirito before, it was easy to tell what he didn't say.

Three years ago—at the end of AD 2022, «that incident» shook all of Japan. Even Sinon, who didn't have any interest in VRMMO at that time was rather clear about this incident because of the daily long reports the media gave. There were more than 10,000 young people who were held captive in the virtual world; and two years later, the people who were released and returned back to the real world was about 6,000. In other words, 4,000 lives were gone because of this incident.

Undoubtedly, Kirito must be one of the «survivors» of that world. And if he wasn't lying, «Death Gun» should be the same as him. No, that's not it. There was an even more terrifying truth behind Kirito's confession.

Those who died in that game basically died in the real world. «Death Gun» knew that they would die and killed many players on his own will. He was «the player who really killed someone in a VRMMO» Sinon said.

That guy in GGO…at this moment, he was in the field of the «3rd BoB finals», and even took the lives of players in the real world through an unknown means. That should be what Kirito was saying.

Sinon finally managed to get something out from her confused thoughts, and immediately felt her body chill.

Her vision started to become dark from the center. There seemed to be something watching her from the darkness. That look—that lifeless, weak and seemingly sticky swamp-like stare was…

"…-non. Sinon!"

Suddenly, Sinon heard someone calling her name, causing her to wake up forcefully. Behind the black shadow that was moving away, Kirito was looking at her worriedly. On seeing that pure and bewitching beautiful

looks of his, the girl felt annoyed that it went against the norm, causing her phobia to be suppressed.

Sinon sighed lightly and answered,

"…Don't worry, I was just a little shocked. To be honest…I really couldn't believe your words straight away…but I don't get the feeling that this is all a lie or a fabricated story."

"Thanks. That's enough."

Kirito nodded his head slightly. At the same time, the light spots on the device in Sinon's right hand flickered. The satellite in the sky above was about to leave. Sinon hurriedly switched the map over to the whole field and started counting the number of dots. Right now, there were 17 dots of lights, which meant that there were 11 dead dim lights, 28 altogether.

"The numbers don't match after all…"

There were really 30 people at the start. Subtracting off the disappeared Pale Rider who disconnected, there was still one person. That should be the «Death Gun» who went underwater to avoid the scan. No, maybe he wasn't just waiting silently underwater, but moving around. However, it was hard to tell whether he intended to move to or away from the two of them. If he were approaching, he could immediately come out from the water on the east side of the bushes Sinon and Kirito were hiding at and launch his attack forcefully…

As Sinon thought about that, all the lights on the screen disappeared. Now, they could only search for the enemy with their five senses for the next 15 minutes.

Sinon glanced to the east slightly, but couldn't find any movement. The mantle guy should have moved on from the bottom of the river to the north. Though his main weapon L115A3 «Silent Assassin» was a terrifying weapon, it was a hand-operated sniper rifle like the Hecate II, so it wasn't suited for mid to close ranged combat. Most likely, he wouldn't force his attack, but pull away to hide his own location.

Thinking that, Sinon exhaled and muttered,

"We have to get out of here first…those far away will think that both of us were fighting and will come over to collect the earnings of a fishmonger."

"…You're right…"

Kirito instantly looked down at the ground, but immediately turned to Sinon and said,

"If I had told you to find an absolutely safe hiding place until the tournament ended…you wouldn't listen, would you?"

"OF…OF COURSE NOT!"

Sinon immediately shouted back with her loudest voice.

"How could I do such a stupid thing that the «Camper Richie» would do! Besides, there's no absolutely safe place on this island. There are caves in the northern deserts where the satellite can't read through, but I'll definitely die if someone throws a grenade in."

"…I got it. Then, let's split up here."

"Eh…"

These unexpected words rendered Sinon speechless. She blinked for a few seconds and finally said with a calm voice,

"The-Then what do you intend to do?"

"Me, I want to…continue chasing after that «Death Gun». Can't let him use that gun to shoot anyone. And…if I face him head on, I'll definitely remember that guy's old name. In that case…"

At this moment, the shiny lips of Kirito were tightly shut. He took a deep breath and faced Sinon straight in the face.

"…Sinon, please get away from that mantle guy. I'll abide by your promise. I'll fight with all I've got when we meet somewhere on this island…Just now, thanks for not shooting at me and hearing me out."

After nodding his head, the black-clothed lightsaber wielder slipped out from the bushes.

"Ah…wait…"

Just when Sinon was about to instinctively call him, he landed on the deep-tea-colored ground and got up and walked towards the metal bridge in the north without turning back.

After staring at that slender figure that was gradually leaving for a moment, Sinon forcefully closed her eyes.

"…."

The air that was forcefully inhaled was exhaled hard with a silent 'that's enough!', and Sinon immediately got up from the woods. The shrubs that were wrecked by her violent action had their leaves scattered before disappearing.

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!"

The girl shouted loudly, and the person who was 20m away stopped just like that. She immediately grabbed the Hecate and carried it on her right shoulder before running to Kirito. No matter if the other person gave such a completely surprised look, Sinon glared somewhere else and said,

"…I'm coming with you too."

"Eh…?"

"You intend to fight against «Death Gun», right? That guy's an expert even without that gun. How can you keep your promise if you lose before you face me? I'm not really willing, but we should work together to chase that guy out of this island…and the tournament finals of this BoB."

After saying out all the words that ran through her mind, Sinon glanced at Kirito. In the end, though that lightsaber wielder frowned, his lips curled up, and looked rather strange. Kirito struggled for a while, seemingly still worried about Sinon's safety, then shook that black hair and said,

"No…you just saw that battle too, right? That guy is really dangerous. Once you're hit, your body in the real world may be…"

"We don't know where «Death Gun» ran off to, it's dangerous whether I'm with you or not. Speaking of which, a rookie like you who would continue to run away without even noticing your surroundings in an open space has no right to worry about me!"

"…Well, what you said makes sense…"

Kirito again hesitated for a few seconds, but finally released the tension in his shoulders and nodded his head, right before waving his right hand at lightning like speed. As Sinon noticed the lightsaber that was drawn out from his waist, the blue and purple energy blade appeared from the handle in Kirito's hand.

Ah, is this guy going to attack me now to fulfill his promise? Sinon couldn't help but stop breathing, but Kirito then looked west. Sinon looked at where he was looking at, and at that moment, about 100m away, under the shadow of a large rock, there were a few red lines appearing at them—the bullet line trajectory the bullets were aimed at.

The unknown enemy's fully-automatic machine gun roared, and Kirito's light saber left several afterimages as it knocked down all the bullets in this bullet storm that didn't leave any openings to escape. Sinon was stunned by this scene before her that she had never seen before in GGO, and could only stand there like a piece of wood, but after a second, she immediately recovered her thinking ability and got down. She released the Hecate in mid-air, and as she laid down in a prone position, she readied the stand on the ground.

At this point, they could confirm that the enemy was using a completely automatic machine gun, but the scope didn't show the Ghillie mantle of the «Death Gun». The enemy had a mysterious opened-helmet with a top, and the right eye had an eyepiece to correct the aim. Sinon remembered that she met this person before. He was a gunner who took part in the last tournament, called «Xiahou Dun». The weapon in his hand was a «Norinco CQ». Though this was a veteran with amazing skill, he was in such a shocked state that his sturdy chin was unable to move up. It couldn't be helped that he had such a reaction, as the one magazine of bullets he fired was deflected by the lightsaber, a weapon anyone thought would just be for show.

"Impossible~!"

Xiahou Dun's stern ancient Chinese general-like face that had a beard let out a voice that didn't fit the times and then hid back into the shadows of the rock. Kirito lowered his head, glanced at Sinon, shrugged his shoulders and said,

"We'll take care of that guy. I'll rush in. You'll be in charge of covering fire."

"…I understand."

Now things just got interesting. What will happen next?"

Though Sinon had this thought, she still set her cheek against the wooden stock of her beloved gun.

Chapter 11

"They haven't really caught onii-chan on camera—"

Lyfa said as she shook her blond pigtail that had a slight green tinge to it, and beside her, Silica was moving the cat ears that came out from her light brown hair to respond to her.

"That's really unexpected...I thought Kirito-san would definitely go in and show all his skills."

"No no no. Don't think of him like that. That guy is really calculative. Maybe he's hiding somewhere and waiting for the number of participants to drop before coming up."

Klein, who was in the bar counter at the corner of the room, said casually. Asuna, who was sitting at the center of the room with Lyfa and Silica, gave a wry smile on hearing this.

"Kirito-kun couldn't possibly do such a thing...I think.."

Asuna said softly. At that moment, the small pixie that was sitting on Asuna's left shoulder started to flap her membrane thin wings. This was the AI Yui, who was Asuna's and Kirito's «daughter».

"That's right. Papa would definitely move behind the enemy at a speed the camera couldn't even catch and launch a quick attack!"

On hearing that logical conclusion from Yui, Lisbeth who was sitting to the left started laughing,

"Ahaha, that's rather possible too. Also, he's using a sword instead of a gun in a game full of gun weaponry."

At that moment, everyone imagined Kirito's situation, and then the room was filled with hearty laughter. The small dragon 'Pina' was curled up on Silica's lap.

It had been a long time since these five people and a pixie gathered together, and right now, they weren't in the real world, but the VRMMO RPG «ALfheim Online» everyone had joined. The vast virtual world inside ALO contained a giant «World Tree» on the map, and there was even a city in the sky called the «Yggdrasil City». Kirito and Asuna rented a room together in a corner of that city, and this became the gathering place tonight.

As expected of a room that cost 2,000 Yurudo monthly, the inside was rather vast. The wooden floor was polished brightly, and a sofa set was placed in the middle of the room. There was also a private bar counter against the wall. There were numerous wine bottles on the shelves. They were found amongst the pile of goods Klein obtained in the virtual world from the lands of the 9 different spirits and the underground Jötunheimr. It's said that there's a fantastical item that 'wouldn't make anyone drunk and yet tastes better than a 30-year-old Scotts Whiskey'. Of course, the under aged Asuna still couldn't understand the value of these wines.

The south side of the room was an entire wall of glass, and normally, this would allow for a wonderful view of the Yggdrasil city. But today, they couldn't enjoy the night scenery of this city. That's because that glass wall could also become a large screen which was airing the scene from another world. That was—the network TV «MMO Stream» telecasting the live view of the «3rd Bullet of Bullets» tournament in «Gun Gale Online».

The main aim for today's gathering was to cheer for Kirito, who went to take part in this tournament without saying anything, and also critique his behavior outside. Unfortunately, their ally, the axe warrior Agil wasn't here as the café bar he was running in the real world was at its busiest. Even so, Asuna herself wasn't at home, but logged in from the 2nd floor of his shop, «Dicey Café». This was to allow her to catch Kirito who was in the middle of the city somewhere and lecture him good.

"But why did that Kirito move his avatar from ALO to GGO just to participate in the tournament?"

Lisbeth was holding a glass cup that was full of jade-colored grape wine as she said that with a puzzled tone. On her left, Lyfa then shot Asuna a look. Right now, only Asuna, Lyfa and Yui knew that Kirito received a request by a friend in ALO, the Undine water mage «Chrysheight»—actually, the person controlling the avatar was an officer of the 'Virtual Division', Kikuoka Seijirou—to investigate GGO. From the way Lyfa gave the 'I'll leave it to you' look, Asuna pondered for a while before answering,

"Well...it seemed that he received some strange job. I heard that he had to investigate some VRMMO, or rather, the current state of «The Seed Nexus». GGO is the only game with a «Money Trading System», so it was chosen to be investigated."

These were exactly the words that Kirito had said, but Asuna didn't think that this was the truth. Of course, she didn't feel that Kirito would lie to her,

but that didn't mean he wasn't hiding something crucial from her. A few days ago, after they finished their date and were about to head home, Kirito explained the reason why he had to switch games, and at that moment, Asuna could tell from Kirito's expression, tone, and attitude that there was something going on.

At that time, she told herself not to ask too many questions as there must be a certain reason why Kirito couldn't say it out. Also, Asuna believed that the reason would definitely not betray her trust.

Thus, Asuna merely said 'do your best' before watching Kirito leave. Right now, she could only hang out with a few good friends, wait in a distant world, and watch the live telecast—

But she couldn't deny that she had been feeling extremely anxious for some reason during the past few days.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Kirito, but a rather vague premonition. Something was about to happen, no, it really will happen. It was like that maze area in Aincrad in the past, being surrounded by a large number of monsters outside the search range as they gradually move in—

Asuna's voice and expression shouldn't have revealed her worry, but as her good friend, Lisbeth could have felt that something wasn't right through her sixth sense as she nodded with an ambiguous expression.

"I see...working. That guy is a person who can immediately get used to any game and is rather suited for this kind of work..."

"But there's no need to take part in a PvP tournament all of a sudden, right? If it were just investigation work, he should be talking on the streets to other players."

On hearing Klein, who was waiting at the wall, ask this question, the four of them, including Asuna and Lyfa felt puzzled too. A while later, Silica then stuttered and said,

"Maybe he...intends to earn a large amount of money by winning this tournament and test the money trading system? I once heard that the minimum exchange rate was rather high..."

On hearing these words, Yui, who was on Asuna's shoulder, immediately quipped, "The official website didn't have any records, but according to news on other websites, the lowest exchange value is 100,000 points in

GGO, and the exchange rate to yen is 100 to 1, so it can be exchanged for 1,000 yen. The operating company seemed like they would be sending the added value digital money over to the players log-in email. The prize for winning this tournament is 3 million points, and so it would be 30,000 yen in exchange."

Yui said that rather simply, but that was the outcome she had after searching through the vast network database. Her search ability and detailed accuracy of information was something even «search experts» could never match up to. It's no wonder that Kirito would often ask her to do his assignment reports, and actually, Asuna and the rest would occasionally do that.

"Thank you, Yui-chan."

Asuna patted the pixie's head with her finger and pondered as she said,

"It seems like the money trading system isn't really complicated...we also send encrypted digital money over through e-mail. Kirito-kun shouldn't have to investigate it personally..."

"Maybe he got lured by the 30k prize money."

On hearing Klein make such a direct remark, everyone gave a wry smile. Lisbeth immediately shot him a 'Kirito's not like you' and continued on normally.

"But in terms of a large PvP tournament, it's normally impossible to come up on a top ranking position through hiding somewhere. I remember ALO had this sort of tournament, and if they hide in the same place, there will be some sort of searching magic that will be automatically activated and won't allow them to hide, right?"

"...And to be honest, onii-chan's personality wouldn't allow him to do that. If he hears someone fighting, he couldn't possibly be patient enough to wait around and hide at a certain spot."

As expected of Lyfa who lived with Kirito for a long time, her words were really convincing. Everyone felt that Kirito really was this sort of person.

As they were thinking, on the large screen that should be about 300 inches wide, there were many live telecasts flashing through. As it was a shooter game, they would normally record the live telecast from somewhere behind the player. As the camera follows the player, the bottom of the screen

would show the name of the player. However, the screen that was divided into 16 different telecasts never showed 'Kirito's name'. The camera would normally show people fighting, and they knew that during the 30 minutes up till now, Kirito hadn't fought yet.

Did he become cautious after moving from a world full of swords and magic into an unfamiliar world of guns? But the Kirito she knew was someone who would accept a challenge no matter the circumstances. Like what Lyfa said, it's rare to take part in such a large scale tournament, so it's impossible for him to not meet any other players during the 30 minutes and hide. If he went off to fight against the hot favorite of the tournament and got beaten splendidly—that would fit his personality, but the participant list on the right side of the screen showed that Kirito's status was 'Alive'.

"...Which means that there's a more important objective than being heavily involved in the tournament?"

As Asuna muttered, the center of the 16 screens displayed a battle that was at its climax.

The main player involved was called 'Dyne'. He readied a machine gun on the end of a red rusted metal bridge and continued to fire. However, the enemy who was dressed in blue and white clothing easily leaped onto the bridge like a Cait Sith before closing in on him. Then, the enemy fired the large gun that those criminals in Hollywood movies would use and finished off Dyne.

At this moment, Lisbeth seemed to be watching the same image, and she whistled.

"Wow, that person is really amazing. Looks like GGO is rather interesting too. I don't know if I can create my own guns..."

Like how she was in SAO, Lisbeth's avatar was a Leprechaun blacksmith. This sounded just like her, causing Asuna to chuckle,

"Hey hey, don't you even think of moving to GGO. There're still many levels of New Aincrad to explore!"

"That's right, Liz-san! They're opening an update above level 20!"

Even Silica, who was next to Lyfa, spoke up to stop her. Lisbeth could only raise her hands and surrender.

"I got it, I got it. I'm just thinking that 'there're such strong people no matter what kind of game it is~' . That blue guy just now should be one of the favorites for this tournament..."

Just as she said that, the «blue guy» in the same screen actually collapsed.

The cameras immediately focused on this blue player who collapsed onto the floor. There was also the name 'Pale Rider' there.

Though he collapsed, he didn't look like he was dead. At this moment, a slight spark seemed to climb out from the bullet hole in his right shoulder. It seemed like the player's action was sealed.

"It's just like the wind magic «Lightning Curtain Seal»..."

On hearing the Sylph mage fighter Lyfa say this, the Salamander swordsman Klein immediately shook that red hair that was made upright by the low-quality headband, and said,

"I hate those things the most. And besides, that tracking ability is too good already, isn't it!?"

"You hate all sorts of weakening spells! Increase your anti-magic ability a bit, will you?"

"Fuun, who cares about you? A warrior like me won't choose a skill with the word 'magic'. I won't choose it even if you kill me!"

"I say, many warriors in old RPGs were warriors who knew black magic!"

Asuna could only give a wry smile as she watched Klein and Lisbeth quarrel. She reached her right hand out and towards that image that was worth noticing before expanding it out with two fingers. The image of Pale Rider on the floor immediately became bigger as the other images were pushed to the side.

It's been more than 10 seconds ever since he was suddenly numbed, but there wasn't anyone who appeared in the camera. They could only see tea-colored earth, the metal bridge, the river that flows below and the forest on the far opposite side that was blurred by the dust—

PAM!

This sound that suddenly rang caused the 5 people to jerk in shock. At this moment, a black cloth entered the camera screen from the left. The camera then panned backwards, and the new character finally appeared on the last screen.

"...Phantom...?"

Was that hoarse voice from Lisbeth, Silica—or Asuna herself?

It was a guy with a dark-grey tattered mantle that danced with the wind. The inside of the head was completely covered by the shadow, which made it hard to tell. They could only see two will-o-wisp like red eyes deep inside. This looked way too similar to the phantom-type monsters that everyone had trouble with in the past at Aincrad.

Asuna blinked and then again looked at the screen. Of course, the person standing there wasn't a phantom, but a player who was taking part in the tournament. This tattered mantle guy should be the one who used an electric bullet to immobilize Pale Rider. ALO had mage fighters who used many binding spells from long range to seal the enemy and finish it off from close range. This was a rather popular ability skillset in a game.

The tattered mantle guy seemed to confirm Asuna's thoughts as he reached his right hand into his mantle near his chest and then pulled out a black gun. However, if that was the main weapon that's able to deal damage to the enemy, it's a little...what...

"...Too painful, isn't it?"

At the corner of the room, Klein seemed to be feeling the same way and raised his doubt. He rubbed the moustache on his chin, and said

"Either way, the sniper rifle on his shoulder just looks way more powerful. Wouldn't finishing off the enemy with that gun be easier...?"

"Maybe bullets are expensive? Isn't ALO like this? There're a lot of catalysts that are required for a large spell."

As everyone considered what Lyfa said, the mantle guy flicked the hammer behind the black gun and pointed the gun at Pale Rider, who was still on the floor.

However, he seemed to be taunting the enemy—or the audience's mood as he still hadn't squeezed the trigger. He raised his left hand, doing

something unexpected. He pointed his thumb at his forehead, chest, left shoulder and right shoulder in order.

At this moment—

Asuna felt a little numbness deep inside her mind.

It wasn't just some special hand sign. It was merely an ordinary «Cross». Besides seeing this in Western movies, there were many professional healer-type players in VRMMO who often do this to cast magic. Of course, a real Christian who sees this would feel really unhappy about this , but Asuna wasn't a Christian, and the feeling just now wasn't of anger of unhappiness. If she had to say it—it felt like her fingers undid a knot that wasn't supposed to be removed...

Asuna's body got tense unknowingly as she widened her eyes. She watched the mantle guy on the screen finish drawing the Sign of the Cross and then put his left hand on the side of the handgun. He took half a step back on his right foot, turned his side to Pale Rider, and squeezed the trigger—

"Ah...?"

Someone suddenly let out a shocked voice.

The mantle guy seemed to be thinking about something as he suddenly bent backwards.

However, 0.1 second later, Asuna and the rest immediately knew why he had to do this. There was a large orange bullet that flew in from outside the screen. It grazed past the open mantle, through where the heart of the avatar was supposed to be and instead traveled through the empty air..

Someone must have sniped at the mantle guy from far away. Also, Asuna saw that the bullet seemed to be coming from the left rear side of him. He actually dodged that attack with such an angle and speed brilliantly, and even though the game world was different, she knew that that was a rather impressive technique.

The mantle guy dodged the bullet that was suddenly shot at him and then lifelessly brought his body back up. He then glanced to the left rear side. Though the face couldn't be seen from deep within the hood because of the shadows, Asuna could feel that he was giving a frivolous smile.

At this moment, a sharp pain occurred deep inside Asuna's mind.

—What's going on? What's with this feeling? Is this...a memory? But how's that possible...I've never been to GGO before. I haven't even seen the game screencaps...

The mantle guy looked like he wanted to shoot through Asuna's doubts as he again raised his handgun.

This time, he finally squeezed the trigger at the player who collapsed due to numbness easily.

The dry gunshot. The bronze empty cartridge flew out and landed on the barren land beside him.

The bullet that was shot hit the Pale Rider who was on the floor right in the middle, creating a small spark on him. However, this didn't look like a powerful hit that would deplete the HP completely.

A second later, Pale Rider himself proved that Asuna wasn't mistaken as he finally recovered from his numb state and turned around, putting the large gun in his right hand right in the mantle guy's chest.

"Woah, a huge comeback..."

Asuna was also predicting that things would go as what Lisbeth said.

However...

Let alone a gunshot or sparks, there wasn't even the sound of a trigger being squeezed. Pale Rider's gun rolled on the floor.

Then, the owner of the gun slowly fell to the right—before collapsing on the ground again.

Under the silver-grey helmet, they could see Pale Rider's skinny nose and tightly closed lips. His lips were trembling, and he suddenly opened his mouth. Then, there was a silent intense emotion that came from deep within his throat. Asuna's instincts were telling her that the player who was controlling this avatar was really experiencing shock and fear.

"Wha...what is happening...?"

As Lyfa cupped her mouth with her hand and said this, something even more unexpected happened. Pale Rider, who was lying flat on the floor, frozen as if a pause button was pressed, then vanished with a white static special effect.

The special effect light still remained in the air even after the avatar disappeared before forming a word. However, the word that showed 'disconnection' was stepped on by a dark black boot. The mantle guy brought his left hand back into his mantle and stepped forward.

It seemed that he knew where the camera was as he raised the handgun in his right hand and pointed at the screen. This caused Asuna to feel that the wall between the worlds of GGO and ALO—no, the real world and virtual world were destroyed, that her real body was being pointed at gunpoint, causing a chill down her back.

Within the darkness deep inside the hood, the red glowing eyes flickered. At that moment, a robotic-like voice stuttered through the screen.

"...My name, and the name of this gun, is «Death Gun»...«Death Gun»!"

The robotic voice had a twisted and intense emotion. On hearing that voice, a large crack formed deep within Asuna's memories.

That took away her breath and increased her heartbeat. Her eyes were watching the hidden face that couldn't be seen on the screen, and the face was lowering his chin. The voice rang again,

"One day, I will, appear in front of you guys, again. And then, use this gun, to bring real death to you. I have, such, a power."

The black handgun let out a soft sound. If he squeezed the trigger now, the bullet would feel like it would really fly through the imaginary screen. This caused Asuna to be wary. The mantle guy seemed to have read through her fear and gave a smile from deep within the hood. And then, he said—

"Don't forget. Nothing's, over. Nothing, is, over—it's showtime—"

On hearing those stuttered English words, Asuna seemed to be dealt the final blow or something.

—I know that guy.

I couldn't be mistaken. I met him somewhere before. I even spoke to him. But where...

No, I know the answer already. At that floating city...Aincrad. Not the safe duplicated world that's floating in the sky of ALO now, but the real unique world I once spent 2 years in. «Sword Art Online» is not over yet. That guy basically left out these words from what he said just now.

—Who is it? Who's the player controlling that mantle avatar...?"

Asuna looked lost, but she was thinking quickly. She nearly jumped up from the sofa the moment she heard something hard land on the floor.

On looking back, she found that Klein, who was sitting on the bar bench let the crystal-base cup in his right hand fall to the floor. The cup that dropped onto the floor broke into many fragments of polygons and disappeared. However, he didn't care that this expensive player made set was destroyed at all as he widened the eyes under the headband.

"Oi, what are you doing..."

Klein stopped Lisbeth from grumbling with a low and hoarse voice.

"Im...impossible...that guy...don't tell me..."

On hearing this, Asuna really jumped up from sofa. She turned and shouted at Klein,

"Klein, do you know him? Who exactly is that guy?"

"No, not really...I couldn't remember his old name...but...I can be certain..."

This swordsman had deep fear in his eyes as he looked at Asuna, and then said,

"That guy's... a member of «Laughing Coffin»."

"...!"

This time, Asuna, and even Lisbeth and Silica gasped. Even for these two girls who lived in the middle levels, the atrocities this brutal murder red guild «Laughing Coffin» committed in Aincrad left a deep impression on them.

Asuna subconsciously placed her hands on their shoulders and timidly asked Klein,

"Don...don't tell me...it's the leader of those guys, that one who used a butcher knife...?"

"No...that's «PoH». Their manner of speaking is completely different. However...that 'it's showtime' just now was the catchphrase that 'PoH' loved to say. This guy should be a high-ranking guy beside him..."

Klein seemed to be moaning about something as he finished talking then turned to look at the screen. Asuna and the other 3 looked over as well.

Right in the center of the large screen, the mantle guy kept his black handgun and started moving far away. He moved in a phantom-like gliding motion and arrived at the bridge in the far corner of the screen. However, he didn't cross directly, but went through the perimeter of the bridge before reaching the river. In contrast to the sharp shadows that were caused by the red sunset, the dark grey mantle immediately went into the shadow of the metal bridge and disappeared.

At this moment, Lyfa's weak voice broke the heavy atmosphere in the room.

"Well...what's that «Laughing Coffin»...?"

"Well..."

Silica, who was sitting beside her, explained to Lyfa, who was the only one present not an original SAO player, the killing atrocities the red guild committed and their vanquish.

On hearing that, Lyfa immediately bit her lips and looked straight at Asuna with her jade-green eyes.

"Asuna-san, I think onii-chan may know that that person existed in GGO."

"Eh...?"

"He came back really late last night, and I felt that there was something strange about him when I reached home...maybe...he went to GGO to settle a grudge..."

On hearing those words, Asuna was immediately stunned, and this time, Lisbeth silently grabbed her hand. The girl forcefully grabbed her friend's hand to calm her down and then shook her short pink hair to raise the question she had,

"But in that case...what about the job? Didn't Kirito go to investigate GGO because of a request?"

That's right. The one who requested Kirito for this job should be the Virtual Division's Kikuoka Seijirou. Even if he was the person in charge of the «SAO Case Victims Rescue Force», he should know the relation between Laughing Coffin and the various Guilds.

But at the same time, Kirito's transfer and the existence of the mantle guy shouldn't be just a coincidence. There must be a certain link, something that made Kikuoka notice GGO and request Kirito to assist.

Asuna forcefully took a deep breath, still grabbing on to Lisbeth's hand which was holding hers and said,

"I'm going off first to see if I can contact the person who made the request of Kirito-kun."

"Eh? Asuna-chan, do you know that person?"

"Yeah. Everyone knows him...I'll call him here to confess. He should definitely know the reason behind this. Yui-chan, while I'm gone, can you please check the relevant records of GGO to see if there's data on that mantle player?"

"Got it, mama!"

The black-haired pixie on her shoulder flew to the table and closed her eyes as she started searching through the important information through the vast network flow.

"...Then, please wait for me, everyone!"

Once Asuna finished shouting, she shook her aquamarine hair, jumped over the sofa and quickly called out her window. She again nodded at everyone and immediately pressed the log out button.

The rainbow colors immediately surrounded Asuna's body, causing her soul to fly from the World Tree in the virtual world to the distant real world.

Chapter 12

Gun Gale Online. The system for this game did not have the «Warrior» or «Mage» class like RPGs in the past.

Each player could choose to increase 6 of their «stats» like strength 'STR', agility 'AGI', vitality 'VIT' and dexterity 'DEX'. Also, there are hundreds of «skills» that include 'masteries', 'suggestion', 'first aid' and 'acrobatics', forming one's own build. In a sense, this means that there were as many classes as the number of builds.

But on the other hand, a build that wasn't planned—like having low STR and unable to equip a large machine gun and yet increasing the mastery of a heavy machine gun—would weaken one's own ability. Because of that, there would definitely be a fixed pattern where people have to attain certain statuses and skills before being able to equip certain weapons. Based on the slight differences of the skills, everyone would classify similar players as «Attacker», «Tank», «Medic», «Scout» and all sorts of names for different classes.

Though Sinon's class as a «Sniper» was extremely rare, it was one of these. To equip a large-sized sniper rifle, they have to strengthen their STR status, and then have to increase their DEX to improve their accuracy, and finally a suitable amount of AGI to get away quickly from the scene after a snipe. However, they would lose if they were discovered, so they gave up on VIT completely. As for skills, they need the necessary gun mastery and also other skills that could improve their accuracy. Of course, they gave up completely on defenses. However, there's also the possibility of a failed snipe because of the «heartbeat count system» even if the build was perfect, and this would be the hard part about this class.

Such an overly specialized class wasn't really suited for a battle royale. While aiming for an enemy far away, they could be easily approached by others. A sniper could only surrender once an attacker-type player with a submachine gun or an assault rifle rushed in. Even if a sniper barely managed to fire at the rushing enemy without aiming—which were normally unable to hit the target—the sniper would end up becoming a pincushion of bullets before they were able to get a second shot out.

Because of the above reasons, if Sinon acted on her own, she would have no chance of winning if a mid-ranged shooter who would value accuracy like the attacker «Xiahou Dun» reaches the range where the Norinco CQ would hit.

However, things were different now. Because of a chance occasion, beside her was a «lightsaber warrior» which no one else in the world of GGO would possibly have. This person looked like a black-haired beauty no matter how you looked at it—but he's actually a boy.

The 'lightsaber' was a weapon that the programmers of 'Zasker' created out of their own whims, and its range would be far less than a sniper rifle.

The attack range was as long as the blade of the saber itself, about 1.2 meters. The GGO world's smallest firearm «Remington Derringer» had a range of merely 5m, but the attack range of the lightsaber was a lot smaller than it. However, that energy blade that was glowing blue and white seemed to have power that far exceeded expectations. The fact that it was able to slice the .50BMG the Hecate fired from close range was the proof of it.

In another perspective, since it could slice any bullet apart, it would mean that this would be the strongest defensive weapon in the world. But even with the «Bullet Line», it's not easy to use a 3cm wide blade to defend against a rain of bullet that was coming at a supersonic speed.

This needed a calm prediction of the bullet lines, order, and perfect response ability to use the sword. Also, the most important thing was not to show any fear when facing a fully-automatic rifle—

What sort of training allowed him to learn such skills? Sinon really could not imagine it. No, this may not be just a VR game technique. It's when the player merged with the avatar through his own experience, belief and power of his soul.

Once he reloaded his weapon, Xiahou Dun again grabbed the CQ and started firing wildly. However, the lightsaber in Kirito's hand created numerous afterimages in the air and accurately picked out all the bullets that would hit him in the grid boxes and deflected them. Sinon could only feel that way on seeing from behind his back.

This real ability that far surpassed the barriers of the virtual world and the real world was exactly what Sinon was looking for. She learnt the calmness of a sniper, no, a coldness—ruthlessness, and then wanted to use it to crush Asada Shino's weakness. She had been moving through the wastelands during the past half year, looking for an opponent who would give her real strength.

Ever since she met Kirito yesterday, Sinon had this thought that she wanted to fight with this powerful foe with all she had, and that she would get such strength if she could win.

But at the same time, she noticed that another emotion was growing in her.

I want to know him more, I want to talk to him more. What happened in that world before Kirito arrived in GGO? What kind of life did he have in that world, what did he learn, and how did he fight his way through? No—I want to know what kind of person he is in the real world. I had never had such thoughts about anyone else while growing up...

"SINON, NOW!"

Kirito cleared off the second barrage of bullets Xiahou Dun fired and shouted, and Sinon's thoughts were brought back to the battle on hand because of that.

Her right index finger moved half consciously, squeezing the trigger of the Hecate. It was a shot crippled by her severe lack of concentration ability right now, but the distance was less than 100m, after all. Sinon couldn't possibly miss with her build based on accuracy. The bullet piereced straight through the middle of the general warrior-type armor Xiahou Dun was wearing.

In a normal battle, a player whose HP was down to zero would shatter like glass and disappear. However, the special rules of the BoB tournament specify that the corpse would be at the scene. Xiahou Dun was sent flying back after he was hit, and the helmet decoration flew in the air. As he landed on the chilly ground in a wide position, the red [Dead] tag started to spin on him.

'Fuu~', Sinon heaved a sigh and got up, changing the magazine of the Hecate which could normally hold 7 bullets, but didn't have much left. Then, she placed her rifle on her right shoulder and glanced at her temporary partner.

Kirito skillfully spun the lightsaber in his hand and placed it back at his waist buckle. The side of his face was dimly illuminated under the red sunset, and looked as enigmatic as ever. After taking a deep breath to hold back that earlier desire to know about him, Sinon quickly said,

"That battle just now will attract lots of people. We have to move quickly."

"Ok."

Kirito nodded his head and then turned his eyes to the river surface nearby.

"«Death Gun» should have headed north down this river. He probably wants to hide somewhere until after the «Satellite Scanner» works at 9pm and then choose his next target. I want to stop him before he kills... shoots someone. Can you think of a plan, Sinon?"

On hearing this sudden request, Sinon blinked a few times and then frantically thought about what she should do. Though she really couldn't think of some good idea since she didn't really understand what was going on, but she immediately opened her mouth and said,

"...No matter how mysterious his power is, «Death Gun» is still just a sniper, so he shouldn't be used to fighting in a place without cover. But if we continue moving north from here, we'll leave the forest stretch on the other side of the river. We'll continue moving up to the center of the island, the abandoned city, and it's all a grassland with great line of vision."

"In other words, he could have chosen that place as the next hunting ground... right?"

Kirito muttered and then looked over at the ambiguous buildings that were far away in the north. Though the distance effect made it look very far, it was just 3km straight on. Without bad AGI stats, they can reach there in around 10 minutes if they run and watch their surroundings.

"Alright then. We'll head towards that city too. If we run down the river, we shouldn't be spotted from both left and right sides."

"...Got it."

After Kirito nodded and said that, Sinon looked back slightly.

Dyne's «corpse» was still lying at the end of the bridge slightly far away, but the existence of the red [Dead] tag showed that he was still alive. The person who was really dead—though it could be just a possibility—was «Pale Rider» who disappeared completely.

To be honest, Sinon still couldn't believe this, but at the same time, she couldn't feel that this was all a lie.

However, there was a definite feeling within her, that during the 3rd BoB tournament, something in her would change. It's just that she didn't know what direction the change would occur—and she didn't know if the opponent who would change her would either be Kirito or that mysterious mantle guy.

Right now, she could only act on her own instinct. That's because 'instinct' was a skill that couldn't be enhanced with any build.

Though Sinon didn't boost it that much like Spiegel, her AGI wasn't that low, and it should have at least been about the same as Kirito's who should have boosted STR stats.

But eventually after running together like this for a while, Sinon had to run with all she had before catching up to the flowing black hair in front of her. To put it simply, their «basic movements» were completely different. There were cracks appearing suddenly on the numerous rocks on the riverbank, and Kirito seemed to have memorized them as he quickly dodged them or leaped over them. He would often turn his head around to match Sinon's speed, which made her all the more unhappy.

Even so, it was because of Kirito's help, running in front of her and pointing out paths that were easy to move through, that she was able to pass through the mid-south area, the grasslands. Unknowingly, the riverbed below her feet became concrete, and when she looked up, she could see the crowd of skyscrapers. They were about to enter the main battlefield of this island, the abandoned city.

"We didn't catch him."

Kirito slowed down and said softly to Sinon. He was somewhat hoping to meet «Death Gun» who went underwater and head towards the city, and attack him while he was unarmed.

"...Maybe we went past him somewhere..."

Once Sinon answered, Kirito turned over, gave a deep thought, watched the river flow behind him, and said,

"No, that's impossible. I checked the water while we were running."

"Is-is that so..."

Speaking of which, a person couldn't stay under water for more than a minute without an aqualung. The large sniper rifle Death Gun was carrying

shouldn't allow for more space to carry one. Then, he must have slipped into the river below the metal bridge, swam north together with the water flow that was heading there, and then got up before running into the abandoned city.

"—That means he should be lying in ambush somewhere inside this city. The river flow stops there."

The river in front of Sinon became a drain that flowed to the city's underground, and the entrance of the underground drain had sturdy metal bars there, which any player could tell that it wasn't to be entered. That obstacle couldn't be destroyed even if hundreds of plasma grenades were thrown.

"I see... there's still 3 minutes till the scan. We can't avoid the satellite scan if we stay in this dump, right?"

Sinon considered Kirito's question and then nodded her head forcefully.

"Right. During the last tournament, the map would show even the 1st level of a tower. If there's really a need to hide, it'll be water that's extremely dangerous or a cave. Other than that, there's no other way to avoid the scan."

"Okay. Once the scan locks onto Death Gun's position, we can immediately attack to stop him from firing. I'll run straight at him. Please provide covering fire then."

"...I'm fine with that..."

Sinon shrugged, but after that, grabbed Kirito who had been waiting for this chance and said,

"But there's a small problem. Haven't you forgotten that «Death Gun» is not that guy's real character name? If you don't know the name, you can't track his position through radar."

"U...Tha-That's right."

The lightsaber warrior crumpled his beautiful eyebrows and sank into deep thought.

"In fact... amongst the 30 participants, you don't know three of them, right, Sinon? Amongst these three, the «Pale Rider» I was tracking wasn't Death Gun. Which means that remaining two... «Jyuushi X» and «Sterben», one

of them is Death Gun... if there's only one person in the city, it'll definitely be him..."

"If both of them are present, we don't have time to hesitate. Now we have to decide which side we want to attack. Well—I just thought of something..."

Sinon coughed dryly a few times and continued,

"...If you read «Jyuushi» backwards, wouldn't it become «Death Gun»[3], and «X» can be read as «Cross», which is the Cross that guy drew... no, things shouldn't be that simple..."

"Hm... but most of the character names in VRMMO were randomly created. Someone like me merely modified my own real name... what about you?"

"...Me too."

They stared at each other with a strange expression, and then coughed dryly a few times,

Kirito seemed to be undecided as he sighed and said,

"If that guy called «Sterben» was really a foreigner like what his name indicated. Are there players from overseas in BoB?"

"Well..."

Sinon looked at her watch. There were less than two minutes before the next scan, so she tried her best to explain as quickly as possible.

"During the first tournament, we could choose American (US) or Japan (JP) servers, but there were still a few foreigners who played the Japanese version. I hadn't played GGO then, but from what I heard from Shi... Spiegel, the winner of the first BoB was a foreigner. That person seemed really strong. He managed to kill off all the Japanese with a knife and a handgun..."

"I see... what's his name?"

"I believe, Sato... Satori or something weird like that. But when I started playing, the Japanese server only allowed those in Japan to connect to it, so the players from the 2nd round and the 3rd round this time are all

Japanese... or at least, living in Japan. Though that «Sterben» was written alphabetically, he should be Japanese."

"I see..."

Kirito blinked hard and looked like he finally decided as he said this,

"Okay, if both of them are at the dump, we'll head to «Jyuushi X». You don't have to panic when I get stunned by the stun bullet like Pale Rider, so just get ready to snipe. Death Gun will definitely use that black handgun for the final hit, so use that chance to hit him."

"Eh..."

On hearing those words, Sinon immediately forgot that there was less than 1 minute left as she widened her eyes. She looked at the black eyes beside her and asked,

"...Why are you so..."

Trusting of me? However, Sinon could not let out the voice at the latter end—

"...I may not attack Death Gun and snipe you from behind, you know..."

Kirito lifted his eyebrows in an unexpected manner and smiled

"I know that you won't do that. Come on... it's about time. I'll leave it to you then, partner."

The black-coated lightsaber user then patted Sinon on the left hand and then walked towards the stairs as he wanted to move from the riverbed to the street.

The place that was touched felt mysteriously hot and painful as the fingers from yesterday, but Sinon chased after the figure wordlessly. Though she told herself that this was an enemy countless times since yesterday, she did not have that feeling anymore.

On the upper levels of the short concrete steps, Sinon and Kirito crouched down at a position that couldn't be seen from the street and waited for the 4th «Satellite Scanner».

Her right hand held onto the device as she watched the watch on her left hand. Right now the time is 8.59pm 55 seconds... 56, if the proceedings of the finals was as fast as last year, it should be about time to enter the

second half, which meant that there were only half the number of players left. In fact, she could even hear gunshots and explosions from the abandoned city. However, the sounds finally stopped for now, so everyone should be hiding in the shadows and watching the device.

58 seconds, 59 seconds, 9pm sharp.

The device map showed numerous white and grey dots.

"Kirito, check the north!"

After saying that softly, Sinon then touched the two gathered spots that were at the soutern-most part of the street. The names that were on them were naturally [Kirito] and [Sinon]. As a battle couldn't last for more than 15 minutes, the other players should know that these two weren't fighting, but working together as partners. Even though this wasn't against the rules and there were many instances of players working with each other, the rest would have the thought that 'this Sinon would actually work together with others'. She couldn't help but pray that they won't be caught on camera together.

—She abandoned those unnecessary thoughts and quickly checked through the names. «No-no», «Yamikaze», «Huuka», «Masaya»...these were all famous players Sinon knew of. The names she was looking for weren't in this city, so that would mean that their hypothesis was wrong—

No.

"...Got it!"

As Sinon shouted this, Kirito's voice answered in perfect unison.

The center of the street had a round building perimeter that looked like a stadium. A light spot remained in what looked like a perfect sniping position. As Sinon touched it with her finger, the name of the character appeared—«Jyuushi X».

She immediately exchanged glances with Kirito, but immediately returned back to her device. To check through the information again, Sinon continued to move her fingers north, and Kirito moved south at the same time. 5 seconds later, they lifted heads at the same time.

"«Jyuushi X» is the only one in this city for now."

Kirito then answered Sinon with a nervous voice,

"Yeah, looks like «Sterben» is not here. In other words, «Jyuushi X» is the «Death Gun», and the prey is..."

Kirito used his finger to point at his own device, showing a building that's slightly west from the stadium in the center—the name was «Ricolo». Being alone, if he wanted to move his hiding place to somewhere else, he would have to put himself in shooting range of «Jyuushi X».

As Sinon nodded her head, the light that represented Ricolo started moving to the exit of the building. Once he stepped onto the road, he would be immediately hit by the L115 sniper rifle stun bullet. They had to stop Death Gun no matter what before he fired that black handgun.

Kirito kept his device and looked at Sinon. He looked like he had something to say, but he merely said,

"Please cover me."

"Understood."

Sinon answered simply and got up. She then moved up the stairs where Kirito was in front of, observed the surroundings, and moved her right hand to indicate that they should move on before rushing up the steps.

The official name of this lone island that became the grand stage of the tournament finals was the «ISL Ragnarok».. Right now, the ancient city was right in the middle of it, and it should be modelled after famous cities from the world like New York City. There were many skyscrapers that mixed all sorts of functions with traditional beauty, and there were numerous English adverts and bulletins. Of course, these things had become old and were covered by weeds and sand.

Sinon and Kirito tried their best to run up the river that became the drain. Right now, other than the two of them, Death Gun and his target, there were also 5 or 6 players in this city. However, they wouldn't care about that. Luckily, the scan just now did not show anyone who could immediately move to their position. Also, those broken yellow taxis and large buses on the road could act as perfect cover. Both of them moved through like this and continued north.

This abandoned city was about 700m in radius, and with the assistance of AGI boost, both of them covered this distance in less than a minute. They could see a large round building, and that was their destination. The stadium was in the center. Sinon gave the hand signals, and they ran into

the shadow of the bus before observing the surroundings through the broken windshield.

The stadium wall was about 3 stories tall, and there was an exit at the north, south, east and west areas. If Jyuushi X did not move away after using the Satellite Scanner, he should be waiting above the west exit. Sinon widened her eyes and stared at the top of the outer wall. With the improved vision skill 'Hawk Eye', the distance effect of an object would be reduced, and the visual identification rate would increase. She found that there was something like a gun muzzle in a triangular hole on a damaged concrete wall, and behind the hole—

"...Got it. Over there."

Undoubtedly, the sniper rifle's barrel was under the place where the sunset shone. At this moment, Kirito seemed to recognize the thing Sinon saw and whispered softly like her,

"Looks like he's still waiting for «Ricolo». Okay... I'll use this chance to attack him from behind. Sinon, get ready to snipe at the building opposite this street."

"Eh... I can go into the stadium too...'

Though Sinon objected, she was immediately interrupted by Kirito's strong and forceful expression.

"This is a battle where you can use your ability to its maximum. I trust that you'll definitely use your gun to cover me when I'm in trouble, so I can fight with that guy. This is what partners are for."

"..."

Once these words were out, Sinon could only nod her head and agree with Kirito's plan. He smiled, glanced at his watch and continued,

"We'll begin action 30 seconds after I leave. Is that enough?"

"...Yeah, that's enough."

"Okay, I'll leave it to you then."

Then, the black-haired swordsman moved his back away from the bus without hesitation—

He looked straight at Sinon from the front, and then ran to the southern exit of the stadium without seemingly letting out any footsteps.

Sinon watched his slender back profile gradually move away, and felt something strange deep within her. Was this nervousness? Or anxiety? They were similar, yet different. This was—right, it's fear...

How is it possible! What am I scared of!?

Sinon gritted her teeth and forcefully chided herself.

—In order to win in this BoB tournament and become the strongest player in the world, this had to be done. I need to eliminate this Death Gun who's using some unknown power outside the system to mess with the tournament, so I have to work together with Kirito for now. The moment we succeed, that lightsaber warrior will become my enemy again. Once I meet him again after that, I will squeeze this trigger without hesitation, take him down and forget about him. That's because I won't meet him again.

While forcing down the sharp pain near her heart, Sinon started running. Amongst the buildings on the streets, there were two kinds, the accessible ones and the inaccessible ones. The buildings that could be entered would definitely have a place where one could tell that it was an entrance. This building in the southwest position from the stadium, separated by a ring road, had a large hole in a wall that collapsed. Once she entered, she would climb up to the 3rd level, and she should be able to see the path on the wall of the stadium. The two positions were really too close, and normally speaking, it's likely that she would be spotted if she sniped here. But even for someone as strong as Death Gun, he had to notice the surroundings when he fights against Kirito. Once she finds an opening, she would shoot without hesitation. Then, she would leave the slum and meet up with Kirito somewhere else. This should be enough...

Even though Sinon tried to take action coolly like usual...

Her heart was already taken up by an emotion that was different from usual.

As she was about to move through the collapsed hole in the tower wall, she felt a sharp chill behind her back. The moment she was about to turn around, Sinon found that she had collapsed onto the road.

—What's happened... why am I on the ground...?

She couldn't recover immediately.

There were goosebumps on her back... there seemed to be something glowing on the left side of her vision field...she raised her left hand in reflex, and the exterior of the arm received a strong hit. Once Sinon realized that she got hit, she immediately intended to run back into the tower. However, her feet couldn't move for some reason and she immediately fell back.

After finally realizing the current situation, Sinon tried to get up immediately, but her body just couldn't respond to command at all. It seemed that she could only move her eyes. She tried to look at her left arm to check the front shoulder that was hit.

There was something that pierced through the desert-colored jacket sleeve and had pierced into the arm—it was more like a silvery needle-like thing than a bullet. It was only 5mm in diameter and about 50mm in length. The base created a thread-like spark that came with a sharp vibration that let out blue and white sparks, and these sparks spread from Sinon's shoulder to her entire body. This was—

A stun bullet.

This was the special bullet that numbed Pale Rider. Assault rifles, machine guns or handguns couldn't load it, and only a few large sniper rifles could use it. However, Sinon never heard the gunshot. There should be only a few players in GGO who had a large sniper rifle that came with a suppressor.

Even if Sinon thought of this, she still couldn't believe that the one who hit her was 'that person'. The stun bullet came from the south direction of the road, but that guy should be in the north perimeter of the stadium. He shouldn't have recognized Sinon's existence and should have been aiming at another target. Based on the Satellite Scanner at 9pm, Sinon could conclude that there were no other players who could have attacked her from the south. Whether it was «No-no», «Huuka» or «Yamikaze», they would need lots of time to break through this heavily collapsed area.

This was really inexplicable. Why—who—how did he do it?...

What answered Sinon's question weren't words, but a scene that appeared in front of her eyes after that.

About 20m south, there were a few light sparks in the space where nothing was supposed to be. And then, a person suddenly appeared in front of her like he ripped the world apart.

Sinon's throat that couldn't let out a voice continued to pant and scream silently.

—Metamaterial Optical Camouflage!

It could hide itself by refracting the light that shone on the surface, and it was said to be the ultimate camouflage ability. But that should be a skill only a few high level boss monsters have. Did they have such a monster in the middle of this battle of the 3rd BoB tournament? But she never heard this news before.

Swoosh!

The dark-grey cloth that was blowing in the wind interrupted Sinon's extremely confused thoughts.

That was a mantle that looked rather tattered and worn out, and there was also the same grey color that covered the head. Sinon could only remain like this and watch the attacker who removed his optical camouflage and showed his identity. This person was the «Mantle» guy who shouldn't have been here.

—«Death Gun»

The 'Silent Assassin' who a few minutes ago caused Pale Rider to disappear, and could have also killed the previous tournament winner «Zekushiido» and the leader of a large squadron «Usujio Tarako».

From underneath the slightly fluttering mantle, she could see the large sniper rifle that reached down to near his shoes and the silencer that was equipped in front of it. If that large mantle had an optical camouflage ability, he could cloak the entire rifle after preparing it, making it possible for him to shoot while invisible. No, that's not all to it. He could avoid even the Satellite Scanner while camouflaged. Otherwise, there would have been a light displayed around this area during the scan earlier.

That means that this mantle guy—«Death Gun» wasn't «Jyuushi X»...?

...Kirito

Sinon called this lightsaber warrior who should be in the stadium behind her, ready to attack Jyuushi X. Of course, she wouldn't get any response.

Paa..Paa.. The footsteps rang in her ears. The mantle guy seemed to glide over as he approached. Deep inside the darkness of that hood, she could see two dark red lights flickering irregularly.

«Death Gun», stopped about 2m in front of Sinon, and was standing there like a phantom.

The muttering that was like metal rubbing against each other came from the face that couldn't be seen.

"...Kirito, now, I can tell, if you're, the real one, or, a fake."

It seemed that the mantle guy already knew that Kirito was at the stadium. These words were said to him instead of Sinon that was laying in front of him. That monotonous voice continued in an interrupted manner, and though it was flat, one could feel an intense emotion hidden inside it.

"I remember, when you, went berserk. Once I kill this woman... who is your friend, once you go berserk like that again, you'll be the, real Kirito. Come... let me see it, let me witness that blade of yours, full of anger, killing intent and madness."

Sinon seemed like she couldn't understand the meaning behind his words.

But the terrifying declaration of the mantle guy made the girl recover from her shock and bewilderment.

—He wants to kill me? This hermit that uses optical camouflage wants to kill me?

Sinon had a flame of anger burning inside her, and the heat even started to overwhelm the numbness.

The stun bullet still had lots of sparks left, but perhaps that's because the part that was hit was the left arm. If she tried a little harder, maybe her right arm should be able to move slightly. Luckily, the support weapon Sinon had on her waist, the MP7 submachine gun was near her right hand, so maybe she still had a chance to hold it and squeeze the trigger. In such a short distance, she should be able to take him down once she finished firing an entire magazine.

Move, move!!

Perhaps Sinon's movement frequency moved from her brain to the AmuSphere and surpassed the numbness as her right arm started to move slightly. Her fingers had already touched the rather familiar MP7 grip.

But at this moment, Death Gun slowly raised the left hand that was empty-handed from under the mantle, using two fingers to touch the forehead underneath the hood. Sinon then noticed that there was a light blue 3-layered circle floating device above Death Gun, and the red [REC] line continued to flicker. That was a live camera feed. The numerous audience from within and outside GGO were watching Death Gun draw the winning Cross sign and Sinon who collapsed in an embarrassing manner.

The skinny left hand that had a black leather glove passed through the chest and reached for the left shoulder.

During this time, Sinon finally grabbed the grip of the MP7.

Of course, there were safeties on the guns in GGO, but it was much more common to see a quick attack than a misfire, so almost everyone kept their safety off. Of course, Sinon was the same. Now, she just needed to aim and squeeze the trigger. There's still time. I can make it.

Death Gun, who finally finished drawing the Cross sign, placed his right hand back into the mantle and got ready to draw it out. Sinon had also used the numb right hand to try and grab the MP7. She nearly dropped the gun a few times while lifting it out, but barely managed to hang on. This time, the mini-SMG which was nearly 1.4kg felt as heavy as a mountain. However, Death Gun probably had to cock the gun. Once she spotted that moment and fired—

However—

At this moment, Death Gun pulled out his right hand from the mantle. The moment Sinon saw that black automatic handgun in his hand, her body and right arm immediately froze like ice.

Why? That was just an ordinary handgun. I faced handguns stronger than this, pointing at me, like the «Desert Eagle» and the «M500». There's nothing to be scared of. Hold that MP7 again, put that gun at the enemy and squeeze the trigger.

Sinon tried to convince herself like this and again tried to move her right arm—

But just when she was about to take action...

Death Gun placed his left hand on the sleeve, and this movement just revealed the left side of the handgun to Sinon. More accurately, the metal grip that was serrated and the little carving at the center of the grip was revealed.

The carving was a circle, and there was a star in the middle.

A black star.

The Blackstar, type 54—that gun.

Why... Wh-Why-Why-Why is-Why is that gun here?

She lost her strength and let it slip out of her right hand, her final hope, the SMG. However, Sinon could not even hear the sound of the gun dropping.

Gachink. The hammer was cocked. The left hand of the mantle guy was holding the grip like this, and then pointed the gun from the side at Sinon in a Weaver Stance. Suddenly, there was a strange distortion from the darkness inside the mantle and hood. The dark space seemed to sway like glue, dripping and finally showing two eyes.

The whites of the eyes were bloodshot, and the pupils were small. Those enlarged eyes looked just like a bottomless pit.

It was that man. That man who, 5 years ago, took the gun—the Type-54 pistol to barge into a little post office in a city, in the north, to shoot Shino's mother. At that time, the young Shino lost all self-awareness and leaped at the gun, snatched it and squeezed the trigger to kill that man—those eyes were just like the man.

—He's here. He's right here. He's hiding in this world, waiting for the chance to take revenge.

It wasn't just the right hand as she lost even more of all her senses. The red sunset and grey ruins gradually vanished, leaving behind only the eyes and the gun in the darkness.

The girl's heart seemed to be beating even louder. If she fainted now, the safety function of the AmuSphere would cause Sinon to log out automatically. However, her consciousness was clear as she waited for the Blackstar's trigger to be squeezed. The gun let out a sound, *kiriri*. Once that finger moved a few more inches, the hammer would hit the firing pin, firing the .30 caliber metal bullet. That wasn't damage in terms of value, but a real bullet. It would shoot through Sinon/Shino's heart inside and outside the game, stopping it, killing her.

Just like what Shino did to that man that day.

That was an unavoidable fact. Even if she did not play GGO, she would be caught up by this man in some place. Her efforts were all in vain. No matter how much she struggled to break free from her past, it was meaningless.

Just when her consciousness was giving up—

A flicker of feelings, as small as fine sand, still remained.

I don't want to give up. I don't want everything to end here. I finally managed to understand the meaning of «strength» and battle. If I can remain with that guy and watch him, one day, I'll...

Sinon's thoughts were finally interrupted by the gunshot that shook the sky.

She did not know where she was hit, but still closed her eyes, waiting for her consciousness to fade.

However—

The mantle guy in front of her was the one who shook.

«Those eyes» in his hood disappeared, becoming red dots again. The right shoulder of the mantle was flickering with some orange damage special effect. So someone shot «Death Gun», just when Sinon was wondering who it was, the second gunshot followed. The bullet that flew this time grazed past the left shoulder of the mantle guy. From the sound of it, the gun caliber must be pretty big. The mantle guy immediately crouched down and hid into the large hole of the tower.

Sinon could see the actions of Death Gun from her position. He placed the Blackstar back into his gun holster, pulled out the L115 on his back and quickly reloaded the magazine. It seemed that he wanted to switch the stun bullets into the sure-kill .338 Lapua bullets. The enemy's fluid movements in readying that large sniper rifle made Sinon, a fellow sniper, feel rather impressed. After aiming, he squeezed the trigger without hesitation.

A silenced *whoosh* gunshot and the third attack occurred at the same time. But this time, the enemy did not attack with a gun. Something that looked like a can rolled onto the road between Sinon and Death Gun—a grenade. Death Gun immediately moved inside the building once he saw that.

Sinon could only close her eyes. If the grenade exploded here at such a distance, she would suffer rather serious injuries. However, it would be better than being shot by Death Gun's Blackstar. That's right; she might as well die like this. To retreat from this tournament, and then retreat from GGO, no, VRMMO, and live a low-profile life in the real world, always bearing the fear of being caught up by that man one day...

However, the developments this time again betrayed Sinon's expectations.

The metal can that exploded half a second later wasn't a powerful plasma grenade an ordinary player liked to use, and neither was it a normal one or an incendiary napalm one—but one that would spout out harmless smoke.

"...!"

The white smoke immediately covered Sinon's vision, and she couldn't help but hold her breath.

This would likely be her last chance of escaping. However, the numbing effect hadn't vanished yet. Even though she should be able to move once she pulled out the bullet that's lodged in her left shoulder, Sinon couldn't get her right hand do this. And at this moment, she didn't even have a will to stand up and fight.

Sinon was unable to keep her cool and could only lie on the floor with her eyes widened until her left arm—was grabbed by someone.

This person just pulled her up roughly like that. That person threw aside the large gun Sinon wouldn't normally see and put his hand on her back. The girl didn't even have the chance to stagger before she was lifted into the person's arms along with the Hecate on her right shoulder.

An acceleration that seemed like it was going to squash her body into his followed. Hiuu! The air sounded beside her, and the surrounding smoke started to grow thinner. The moment Sinon recovered her sight again, she caught sight of the other player who was holding her in front of him, running forward.

That person had near transparent white skin, obsidian-like pupils and flowing black hair.

...Kiri, to.

Sinon wanted to call him, but was unable to make a voice. His beautiful girl-like face was showing an abnormally serious look to the—no, it was more like he was really desperate. She understood that he is straining his nervous system to exert physical movement commands to his avatar.

It's to be expected that he would be having so much trouble. Even if Kirito was a STR first-type player, and that he had only a light weight lightsaber and handgun, he would be at his limit carrying Sinon and Hecate. It was a miracle for him to be even sprinting at this point. Also, looking closely, one could tell that Kirito himself wasn't completely unscathed. The new wounds

on his right and left shoulders were giving off a red dragging special effect. From the intensity of the light, the bullet caliber that hit him should be rather large. GGO was a VRMMO that originated from America, so the pain absorption rate should be rather low. With this level of damage, even if he didn't feel hurt, there should be some form of numbness on him.

...That's enough. Put me down and run away.

Even though she thought this way, the girl still could not say it out in the end. Her entire body, no, even her consciousness was completely numb.

Thus, Sinon could only blink even though she saw a large caliber bullet fly out from behind. Her sleepy mind was thinking. She didn't hear the gunshot just now, which meant that the bullet was fired from Death Gun's L115. With the effects of the smoke screen, this snipe was too accurate, which meant that he was right after them. She didn't know what sort of character the enemy was, but he couldn't be slower than Kirito who was carrying Sinon, and it would only be a matter of time before they got caught up.

Kirito himself should understand this too. However, the lightsaber warrior never intended to stop or put Sinon down. He merely gritted his teeth, breathed hard and continued to run forward.

Both of them ran to the east side of the round stadium, ready to leave from the north side of the ruins. Like the south side, there was a main road that stretched on forward. There were a few damaged cars and buses scattered all over the road, but it wasn't enough for them to leave the ruins while being completely hidden. Where is Kirito running to?...

What answered Sinon's doubt was the half-wrecked neon-light advert signboard.

The words that flickered weakly under the sunset showed the words [Rent-a-Buggy&Horse]. This was the unmanned transport rent area that the capital Gurroken also had. Amongst the 3 buggies in the motorpool, two of them were nearly completely wrecked, and only one looked like it could still be in operation.

However, that wasn't the only transportation tool for them to rent. Like what the advert said, there were even a few large four-legged animals beside the buggies—horses. But of course, these horses weren't real animals, but mechanical horses with metal frames and gears showing outside. Also, there seemed to be only one that still worked.

Kirito rushed into the motor pool and immediately hesitated over whether they should choose the 3-wheeled buggy or the mechanical horse. Sinon squeezed out a soft voice from her still-stiff mouth,

"A horse would be... too difficult. Its ability to break through obstacles is great... but it's really hard to control it."

Although it seemed that almost no one was able to control the hand-controlled 3-wheeled buggy, the mechanical horse's hard-to grasp personality would make it a lot tougher to control than a buggy. As this had no relevance to the skills of the avatar, but that of the player's own skills, a lot of time, hard work and practice would be required for them to use these transportation tools at their own will. For GGO that's only been operational for less than a year, there shouldn't be a lot of people who had so much time to practice.

On hearing Sinon's words, Kirito seemed to hesitate, but he soon nodded his head and ran towards the only three-wheeler buggy that could still work. He touched the panel screen and started the engine, let Sinon sit on the rear panel, and once he got onto his own seat, he hit the acceleration on the three-wheeler buggy. The large back wheel immediately let out a sharp rubbing sound, gave off white smoke and started spinning.

As the vehicle moved to the north road, Kirito immediately stopped and shouted,

"Sinon, can your sniper rifle destroy that horse?"

"Yes..."

Sinon pulled out the stun bullet with the right hand that finally managed to shake off the numbness and blinked her eyes. She saw the mechanical horse behind and immediately understood Kirito's intention. He was worried that the mantle guy—Death Gun would use that horse to catch up. Sinon really felt that it wasn't really possible, but she still nodded her head.

"Go... got it. I'll try..."

She used her still-trembling arms to carry the Hecate that was unstrapped, and pointed the gun at that metallic horse that was standing coldly 20m away. This was a distance where she could hit without aiming through the scope and use skill assist. As Sinon placed her hand on the trigger, the light green reticle immediately appeared. She gathered the point at the side of the horse, and her finger got ready to exert force—...

Kachink!

The numb feel made Sinon widen her eyes.

She couldn't squeeze the trigger. Sinon was wondering whether she accidentally turned the safety on, and turned to check the side of her beloved gun. However, that wasn't the case. The sniper then exerted force on the finger again, but the trigger felt like it was welded and knocked her right hand aside,

"Eh... why..."

Gachink, *gachink*

No matter how many times she tried, it was the same outcome. She stared blankly at her finger, and what appeared in front of her was an unbelievable scene. Her finger didn't even touch the trigger. The white fingertip and the smooth metal had a gap between them, several millimeters wide. And no matter how hard she exerted force, she just couldn't remove that distance...

"...I couldn't press it... why... WHY CAN'T I SQUEEZE THE TRIGGER?...!"

The voice that came from her own throat was a soft and hoarse cry.

It seemed that the one who let out the cry wasn't that ice-like sniper, but Asada Shino in the real world.

At this moment...

A figure appeared behind the thin smoke on the east side of the stadium.

The mantle on the enemy shook, and he was still holding onto a large sniper rifle. Of course, he was «Death Gun»—or maybe he could be «that guy» who borrowed this appearance.

Sinon's eyes darkened. Her legs lost their strength. Her body started to turn cold.

Ahh... how did it happen? That was an omen of a fit. Sinon, who had a different personality than the real life Shino, never had this happen to her before. It didn't even happen when she first logged in and was immediately forced to wield a gun...

"Sinon, grab on!"

Suddenly, a forceful and powerful voice sounded right as a hand grabbed her left arm hard. Sinon grabbed onto Kirito's body just like that. Then, the old fossil fuel engine immediately let out a growl. The buggy's front wheel went up and then flew as if it was shot out on the road.

Every time Kirito used his foot to step on the pedal, Sinon felt that an acceleration was making her move backwards. While surrounded by fear, she continued to maintain her consciousness and grabbed onto that skinny body with all she had. A dark force continued to try and swallow her, and the warmth that was coming from Kirito's body was the only reliance she could use to fight it.

The buggy that reached the top gear let out a sharp roar in the ruins and started to race down the street.

—Can we... really escape safely...?

Though she felt anxious inside, Sinon didn't have the courage to turn back. It was only now that she found that her body was still trembling.

The sniper girl moved her stiff fingers, ready to move the Hecate she was carrying in her right hand back onto her shoulder. At this moment, Kirito's anxious voice rang again,

" —DAMN IT, WE'RE NOT OUT OF THIS YET! DON'T RELAX!"

She looked back instinctively—

She immediately saw the mechanical horse that wasn't destroyed successfully dash out from the motor pool that was gradually drawing further away. The girl widened her eyes in disbelief, but there was no need to tell who the person on it was.

The mantle on the rider flapped like black wings of a crow. He carried the L115 on his back and held the metallic leash with both hands. That posture of kneeling down on the stirrup and moving up and down as the horse galloped looked no different from a skilled rider.

Clak, clak.

The heavy footsteps caused Sinon's to descend into confusion.

"Why?..."

He could actually ride a horse. She used to hear that even those with horse riding experience in real life would have difficulty controlling the mechanical horse in this world. However, the dark-colored horse galloped and leaped over the abandoned vehicles, chasing with a similar speed to the buggy.

That look of his made him look like he wasn't an ordinary player like Sinon, but rather, a concentration of fear within the girl's heart that was flowing out. Even though she tried to look away, she couldn't help but concentrate on the face of the rider that was 200m behind them. Sinon obviously couldn't tell the distance clearly, but she felt that she could see those eyes that were deep within the darkness of the hood and a bloody mouth revealing a smile.

"He's catching up...! Faster... get away... get away...!"

Sinon cried out with a soft wailing voice.

And Kirito seemed to be answering her request as he pushed the three-wheeler buggy to full speed. But at this moment, the rear wheel of the buggy ran over an obstacle and jumped up, causing the back to slide to the right.

Sinon screamed and tilted left instinctively, hoping to use this to balance the buggy. If the buggy skidded at this time, Death Gun would catch up to them in 10 seconds. Kirito cursed while he controlled the shaking frame of the vehicle.

The buggy let out a sharp rubbing sound and skidded left and right, and several seconds later, finally regained balance and again accelerated. However, Death Gun used this minor error to close a large part of the gap between them.

As they drove through the highway of the ruins, obstacles continued to appear as if someone was playing a prank on them, causing the buggy to continue shaking from side to side when made to drive quickly. Also, there was a layer of thin dust all over the road surface, and the wheels would lose grip once it ran over them. Every time that happened, the buggy would skid slightly to the side, and Sinon would tense up.

Even though the pursuer was under a similar condition, this road that was full of obstacles was more advantageous to the mechanical horse. Thus, the mantle guy continued to easily avoid the abandoned cars and close in on Sinon and Kirito. Also, the enemy had another advantage.

Even though the three-wheeler buggy and the mechanical horse were transportation tools that could accommodate two people, there were two people on the buggy, and one on the mechanical horse. Of course, the buggy would be slower in its acceleration.

Every time the horse appeared from behind the shadows of the obstacles, the profile that was closing in would become larger. Even though there was still some distance, Sinon still felt there was a stinging metallic sound continuing to irritate the back of her neck.

Just when both parties were 100m away from each other,

Death Gun's right hand let go of the rope and pointed something at the two of them. What he was holding was – that black handgun, «Type-54 Blackstar».

Sinon, who felt like her entire body collapsed into the freezer, couldn't get down into the buggy for cover and could only watch as the handgun was aimed at them. Her teeth were trembling, letting out irregular kakaka sounds. Fuu, the red tip of the bullet line soundlessly touched Sinon's right cheek. She turned her head to the left without hesitation.

Then, the gun let out an orange glow like a devil with a bloody mouth—

BAM!

The fatal bullet dragged a sharp sound and flew towards her before gliding 10cm past Sinon's right cheek.

Even though the bullet moved past the buggy and hit the abandoned vehicle in front, the particles that floated in the air still grazed past Sinon's face. At this moment, she felt a sharp pain as if someone scattered dry ice on her.

"NOOO!!!!"

This time, Sinon finally cried out loud in anguish. She turned her eyes away from the Death God behind her and stuck her face onto Kirito's back. After that, the second bullet seemed to hit the rear fender of the buggy, and they could feel a strong jerk on their feet.

"No... save me... save me..."

Sinon curled up like a baby and continued to repeat the same words over and over again. She couldn't hear a gunshot, but the sound of the horse galloping was getting closer, and it seemed that Death Gun intended to catch up to the buggy before firing.

"Sinon... can you hear me, Sinon!"

Kirito called Sinon's name again, but couldn't get any response. She just remained crouched against his back, letting out soft whimpers.

"SINON!"

After she got shook by the sharp sound again, Sinon finally managed to stop whimpering. She moved her neck slightly and looked over at the back profile of Kirito which had that flowing black hair. Kirito was looking forward, pushing the three-wheeler buggy to its limit and saying with a stiff yet calm voice,

"Sinon, we'll be caught up at this rate—hurry up and snipe him!"

"I...I can't do that..."

Sinon forcefully shook her head to refuse. Though she felt the heavy weight of the Hecate II, this weight that would normally fill her up with battle intent couldn't bring her any feelings.

"It's alright if it doesn't hit! Just hold him off!"

Kirito persisted in shouting, but Sinon could only continue to shake her head.

"...I can't do it... that guy... that guy, he..."

That guy was the soul that awakened from her memories, and even if she used twelve 7mm bullets to hit him in the heart, she couldn't stop him—that was what Sinon believed. Direct damage was already ineffective, let alone holding him off.

However, Kirito turned around, and those black eyes were shining brightly. He said,

"Drive then! I'll use that gun to snipe him!"

On hearing those words, the little pride that remained in Sinon's heart shook her up—

—Hecate's... my identity. Other than me... no one else can use it...

These interrupted thoughts seemed to act like some sort of weak electric pulse in a circuit and caused Sinon's right hand to move.

She slowly moved that large sniper rifle from her shoulder and then placed the gun over the rear fender on the back of the buggy, while timidly supporting her body she brought her eye over to the scope in front.

The magnifier was at its minimum, but at a distance of less than 100m, the figure of the mechanical horse carrying Death Gun took up more than 30% of the scope's view. Sinon originally intended to increase the magnifier to hit straight in the middle of Death Gun, but the hand that reached out to increase the magnification stopped.

If she continued to enlarge it, she would see that face under his hood clearly. On thinking up till here, her fingers couldn't move. Sinon then moved her right hand over to the gun grip and got into sniping position.

Death Gun should have noticed Sinon's action, but he had no intention of dodging, let alone stopping. His hands were holding onto the leash as he continued to race over. Sinon knew that she was being underestimated, but on thinking that Death Gun may take out that handgun—that accursed Type-54 handgun Sinon herself used that eventful day, she couldn't feel any anger, just complete fear.

One shot. Just one shot would be enough. In such a close distance, even if the enemy could see the bullet line, there was a chance that he could fail. Sinon gathered that pessimistic and little battle intent together, ready to let the index finger in the trigger guard touch the trigger.

However...

A surge of mysterious anxiety struck, again preventing her action.

No matter how hard she tried, her finger just couldn't touch the trigger. It felt like her one and only partner, Hecate, was rejecting Sinon herself—

"I can't shoot it..."

Sinon/Shino muttered with a hoarse voice,

"I can't shoot. My fingers won't move. I can't... can't fight anymore."

"NO, YOU CAN!"

The strong yet stern voice rang from behind her.

"THERE'S NO ONE WHO CAN'T FIGHT! THERE'S ONLY THOSE WHO GIVE UP ON FIGHTING!"

Even though she was chided by her greatest rival Kirito, the flame that was about to disappear in Sinon merely flickered.

Choose? I'll just choose to give up on fighting then. I don't want to relive those painful memories. I had enough of seeing my hopes taken away and destroyed. It's just my delusion to think that I can survive in this world if I have ability. I will always have to carry the fear of the grudge by that man and the gun. I can only lower my head, hold my breath, not look, and not bring any feeling to this...

Suddenly, a scorching flame reheated Sinon's frozen right hand.

The girl opened the eyes that were originally closed.

Kirito was originally sitting on the seat of the buggy, but at this moment, he turned around, and he was leaning on Sinon's back while standing on the pedal. He reached his right hand out, holding Sinon's right hand that was about to fall off from the Hecate's grip and held it forcefully.

It seemed that he was able to set the three-wheeler buggy's gas pedal to full throttle as the buggy was still running forward. However, they would soon hit an obstacle. Kirito himself seemed like he didn't mind as he shouted at Sinon's ear.

"I'll shoot too! So, just once, please move this finger!"

Sinon wasn't clear if the system would allow two people to shoot one gun. However, the flame-like heat that radiated from the touch of Kirito's hand made her feel that the frozen fingers were starting to melt.

The sniper's fingers twitched slightly—the finger touched the metal that formed the trigger.

In her eyes, she could see the bullet circle. However, the aiming circle was so large it exceeded Death Gun's body into the area surrounding it and was irregularity moving about. Sinon's heart was in a mess, and the buggy that was racing was jerking way too much. If this kept up, there was no need to consider how the enemy will dodge, because the bullet wouldn't fly straight.

"No-No way... I can't possibly aim if it keeps jerking like this..."

Sinon weakly moaned, but a calm voice immediately rang beside her ear,

"Don't worry, it'll stop shaking in 5 seconds. Listen up... 2, 1, NOW!"

BAM!

The powerful shock came with a sudden sound, and the buggy stopped shaking in a miraculous manner. It seemed that they were flying in the air after being hit by something. Sinon glanced at the ground from the corner of her eye, and found that there was a wedged-shaped sports car lying there like a ramp. Kirito let the buggy head to this direction before he even turned around.

...Why is he so calm even in such a situation?

Immediately, Sinon asked in her heart, but she again denied her own question.

...No, this has nothing to do with being calm. This person just did what he could do. He never tried to find excuses for himself and chose to fight with all he's got. That's—that's this person's real ability.

During the finals of the preliminaries yesterday, Sinon once asked of Kirito—with such ability, what he was still scared of.

However, this question itself was a huge error. No matter how scared, troubled, or pained he was, he could still move on. That was the real «strength». He could only choose over whether he should get better or not, whether to fire or not.

Of course, she couldn't be as strong as Kirito. But at least for now—she wanted to at least give it her all.

Sinon bet on all her heart, to squeeze her finger that was placed against the trigger of her beloved gun.

This mere slight adjustment of the trigger felt extremely heavy. However, with the support of that warming hand, Sinon's finger finally squeezed it slowly. The reticle that appeared in her sights started to shrink, but half of the enemy was still outside the circle.

She probably, no, definitely won't be able to hit the target.

Having fought for so long as a sniper, this was the first time Sinon had such a thought as she squeezed the trigger.

Like an unpleasant nauseous feeling that was about to be puked out, her beloved gun Hecate II shot the bright flame from the muffler, shooting a loud bang she never heard before.

Still in an unstable state, Sinon couldn't hold back the recoil effectively as she jerked back, but Kirito held her steadily. The buggy jumped over the top and started falling, and Sinon could only stare wide-eyed on the vehicle and watch the bullet fly. Under the sunset, the spinning line grazed the riding Death God with the nearest of misses and went by his right.

—I missed...

There were still bullets inside the magazine, but Sinon didn't even have the strength to pull the bolt down and could only mutter.

However, perhaps the pride of this «Goddess of the Underworld» wouldn't allow this bullet to miss completely as the anti-tank sniper rifle didn't leave a useless hole in the asphalt, but went into the truck that was lying on the road.

In GGO, all the artificial objects that were placed in battle zones seemed to be there for players to use as cover. But as expected of a game that used MMORPG and FPS elements, each artificial object had a little trap. Like how a gas tank or a large machine may be lit on fire or even explode once they take a certain amount of damage. With such a chance, the old abandoned vehicle that was placed on the road may have some gas inside the fuel tank. Once it got hit by the bullet—

The large truck started to let out small sparks.

Death Gun, who was just ready to move beside the truck, immediately intended to let the mechanical horse jump to the other side after noticing it.

But before he could do that, a large fireball exploded, and the orange glow immediately swallowed the bus and horse.

The three-wheeler buggy that finished its jump landed at this moment, and as it landed, the tremendous bounce and the powerful impact that shook the entire main road occurred at the same time. Even though the scene of explosion couldn't be seen because of the sports car that acted as a

platform, Kirito and Sinon still witnessed the mechanical horse scatter into pieces in the pillar of fire.

—Did I take him down...?

Sinon had this thought for a moment but immediately shook it off. How could an explosion of an obstacle kill a Death God? The most it could do was to buy some time, but to them, this was really a great miracle.

Kirito, who again turned to look in front, first tried to steady the buggy that was about to collapse sideways, and then continued to accelerate.

Sinon collapsed onto the seat and watched the smoke float up into the purple sunset. She couldn't think anymore, and could only let her body jerk along with the racing buggy.

The number of buildings and abandoned vehicles on both the left and right sides started to decrease, and the natural rocks and mysterious plants started to take over. Once she recovered, she found that the three-wheeler buggy had already passed through the center of the lone island and arrived in the desert in the north.

The path went from the damaged asphalt road to a mere gravel path that was hardened by compression. The three-wheeler buggy started jerking more and more, and Kirito could only slow down and cautiously move the buggy through the sand dunes.

Sinon was merely counting the number of big cacti around them, but seemed to realize something as she looked at her left hand. The long and thin needles showed that the current time was 9:12pm. What shocked her was that they spent merely 10 minutes moving from the riverbank in the south of the streets to the ruins up here.

But during this short time, the finals of the BoB—no, this game called GGO had a tremendous change in definition to Sinon.

As she used her slightly cool head to think, she knew that the player called «Death Gun» couldn't be the man she shot in that post office robbery incident a long time ago. The «Type-54 Blackstar» that caused Sinon to think that way wasn't a really popular gun, but it wasn't some rare weapon and was rather cheap. Maybe Death Gun merely chose it as his support weapon out of coincidence.

The problem was that she could immediately feel fearful, timid and it could even trigger her phobia once she saw that gun.

Sinon had treated those enemies in this world who use the Blackstar as one of her goals. She believed that she could calmly fight against them even if that gun was pointed at her, and finally bury it amongst the many targets Sinon shot down in the past.

But she was ever so awkward when she met it for real. The effects of the stun bullet was completely gone, but she just felt rather slow all over, and her hands couldn't help but continue to tremble. Even the familiar weight of the Hecate she carried just felt like a burden.

—Everything was a lie, I was just fooling myself. The large amounts of kills I got, and this thought that it could prove my ability, they were completely meaningless...

As Sinon was feeling dispirited, the wheels suddenly skidded, and the buggy then stopped. Kirito's sturdy voice rang from behind her,

"Ahh... how can we find a hiding place in the midst of a vast desert?..."

On hearing those words, Sinon started thinking. Kirito was already severely injured after coming to save Sinon while she was stunned. Now he should be thinking of hiding in the desert and using the first-aid pack that was given to all the players to recover their HP. However, that equipment's healing effect was rather slow. If he intends to recover safely, it wouldn't be enough to hide behind the sand dunes or the cacti.

Sinon held up her still blurry head and looked around. As she found was that reddish-brown rocky hill slightly further away. She slowly pointed there,

"...There should be a cave there."

"Ah, that's right. You said that there are caves to avoid the Satellite Scanner in the desert."

Kirito quickly answered and turned the buggy off the road. A bit later they reached the rocky hill and circled around it. As Sinon expected, they discovered a huge hole at the north side. Kirito slowed down and brought the entire buggy inside.

The hole was rather big, and there was still a lot of space once they drove the vehicle over to a place that couldn't be seen from the entrance. Though the inside was dark, the sunset that was reflected on the wall would still allow all five fingers to be seen.

Kirito turned off the engine, stretched his body out on the sandy floor and turned to look back at Sinon.

"We'll hide from the next scan here—ah, wouldn't our device not receive the satellite information?"

On hearing that unnecessary question, Sinon couldn't help but give a wry smile. She got off the buggy with weak legs, arrived near the granite wall, sat down and said,

"...Of course. If other players were nearby. They would try their luck by throwing a grenade, and both of us will be dead inside."

"I see. But at least it's better than removing all my equipment and swimming underwater... and speaking of water..."

Kirito left the buggy and glanced at the entrance of the cave before saying,

"«That guy» just appeared beside you, right? Does that mantle have some sort of ability to make him invisible? He disappeared at the bridge. The satellite couldn't get any visual on him. Maybe it's not that he swam but used that ability..."

"...I guess so. That's an unique ability called «Metamaterial Optical Camouflage». It's normally reserved for boss monsters... but it's not strange to have such an equipment with an effect like that."

At that point, Sinon finally understood what Kirito was worried about. She looked inside the cave of the entrance and then softly said,

"...I guess it's alright here. There's sand all over the ground, so someone invisible can't hide their footsteps, and will also leave footprints. He can't appear suddenly like just now."

"I see, but we better prick our ears."

Kirito finally seemed relaxed and then sat slightly far away on Sinon's right side. He took out the first-aid kit from his belt pouch and tipped the front on his neck in a stiff motion before pressing the button on the other side. A light 'zzz' sound could be heard, and the red light that showed the recovery

effect covered Kirito entirely. A first-aid kit could recover 30% HP, but will take 180 seconds, so it was meaningless to do this in battle.

After turning her eyes from the right side, Sinon again looked at her watch. The time now was 9:15pm, which was the fifth Satellite Scan. However, like what Kirito said just now, as the electric pulses that were sent over by the satellite couldn't reach inside this hole, the map on the receiver wouldn't show any data.

The last tournament's battle royale started at 8pm, and it ended with the last survivor «Zekushiido» taking on «Yamikaze» and winning to put an end to this. The overall time was slightly more than 2 hours. Assuming that the progress rate was the same this time, there should be around 10 players left. In the last tournament, Sinon became the 8th casualty after merely 20 minutes, so this would far exceed her previous record. However, she wasn't happy at all.

Sinon put her left hand down, leaned her back on the cave wall and muttered,

"...Do you think... that «Death Gun» could have died in that explosion?"

She knew deep inside that there was only a minimal possibility, but couldn't help but ask for Kirito's view. After a while, Kirito answered softly,

"No... I saw him jump off the mechanical horse before the truck exploded. Though he couldn't be unscathed... I don't think he'll die like this..."

Any player who would get involved in such an explosion should have taken a lot of damage.

Any ordinary player maybe.

But that guy was definitely not ordinary. The mantle guy used the «Blackstar» to kill Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako, and Pale Rider was most likely dead. Maybe he was a wandering spirit in the network. However, Sinon obviously didn't say this out loud. She merely answered, "I see" , and then placed the Hecate onto the sandy floor beside her, cupping her knees together.

Sinon lowered her head and asked another question,

"How did you come and save me at the stadium so quickly just now? Didn't you reach the outside top wall?"

Kirito seemed to give a wry smile. Sinon looked beside her, and found that the lightsaber warrior was still leaning on the wall, both hands behind his head.

"...I knew we were mistaken the moment I saw that «Jyuushi X» whom we thought was Death Gun..."

"...Why?"

"Because that person looked like a real girl no matter what, not like this male character of mine which looks so feminine."

On hearing that somewhat unexpected answer, Sinon muttered "I see" . Kirito nodded his head slightly and gave a somewhat bitter expression.

"At that moment, I knew that we left out something very big... on thinking that Death Gun could attack you, I forced my way to slash her when she was introducing herself. I should apologize to her later.. On a side note, her name had to be pronounced as «Musketeer X»."

"Oh..."

Sinon again responded, and then guessed whether Kirito was going to apologize because his battle method was too forceful or that the other party was a girl. But just when she was about to ask, Kirito carried on,

"I took a hit, but still managed to take her down. Looking south from atop the stadium, I found you lying on the floor... Once I saw that things were bad, I immediately grabbed the large sniper rifle and smoke grenade Musketeer-san dropped and jumped from the perimeter. I fired and threw the grenade and then ran at that person..."

Kirito then shrugged at that moment, seemingly indicating 'you know the rest'.

In other words, the two bullet scars on Kirito were from Musketeer X's snipe and the L115 from Death Gun. Though he said that in a rather easy manner, the lightsaber warrior had been shot twice after defending flawlessly against Xiahou Dun, which showed that he didn't even care for his own safety when he went to save Sinon.

On the other hand—looking back at that situation, Sinon obviously pulled Kirito down. Even though Death Gun had the unexpected unique equipment «Metamaterial Optical Camouflage», Sinon could have dodged

that stun bullet if she noticed the movement behind her. If she met up with Kirito without being paralyzed, they could even have used the chance to take down Death Gun.

Of course, that was if Death Gun wasn't a dead soul but an ordinary player.

Feeling troubled and weak, Sinon dejectedly rested her forehead on her kneecap. She felt Kirito close in and say in a soft voice,

"You don't have to be so hard on yourself."

"..."

Sinon sighed and waited for Kirito to continue.

"I didn't notice that that guy was hiding nearby too. If our roles were reversed, I would be the one who took the stun bullet—you would save me at that point too, right, Sinon?"

That voice was ever so steady—

Yet it made Sinon feel extremely hurt deep inside. She forcefully closed her eyes and muttered to herself.

This was a person she originally viewed as a rival... This enemy who she thought she could fight against actually said such encouraging words. Her failure, weakness were all seen by him... Right now, he just looked like he was appeasing a kid.

And what made Sinon unable to bear with this or even forgive herself was that while she felt extremely humiliated, she had a huge urge to accept his comfort.

Once she told her fears and pains that were tormenting her, and reach her hand out to this boy who's one meter away... That enigmatic lightsaber warrior who had such sincerity inside, would definitely comfort this Sinon in the game... The real Shino with all his earnesty and words. Maybe she could even get this «redemption» of that post office robbery incident 5 years ago from him.

If she did that, the other icy cold-like sniper Sinon may completely vanish. But speaking of which, how could she say her true thoughts to someone she just met yesterday—and doesn't even know his real appearance.

Sinon had never said her true thoughts to even Shinkawa Kyouji, who was her friend for more than half a year.

As she was anxious, powerless, puzzled and messed up, the girl could only continue to hug her own knees.

Just like that, after a few seconds...

Kirito's voice finally rang again.

"...I'm going then. Just rest here first, Sinon. Actually, I was really hoping that you could log out... but you can't do so during the tournament..."

"Eh..."

Sinon lifted her face up instinctively. Kirito had already used the stone wall to support his body and checked the remaining amount of energy in the lightsaber.

"...You intend to fight... alone... against that Death Gun...?"

Once Sinon finished asking in a hoarse voice, the other person nodded slightly but firmly.

"Yeah. That guy is really strong. Even without the power of that black handgun, his equipment and stats were already a headache. Most importantly, the player's own ability was rather unique too. To be honest, it should be hard to take him down before the black handgun is fired. We were able to escape just now, but half of it was because it was a miracle. If we get aimed at by him... I don't have the confidence to face him courageously. I might even leave you and run away... so I can't take the risk of having you follow me."

"..."

Sinon originally thought that this lightsaber warrior was absolutely confident in his own abilities, so she couldn't help but look at his face after hearing this unexpected declaration. At this moment, a glint appeared in the black eyes, showing the insecurity he never had.

"...Even you are scared of that guy?"

On hearing Sinon's question, Kirito placed the lightsaber back onto the belt pouch and gave a bitter smile.

"Yeah, of course. If it was the old me... even if I knew that I could die, I would fight him with all I've got. But... I have a lot of things I want to protect now. So I can't die, I really don't want to die..."

"Something.. to protect...?"

"Yup. No matter whether it's the virtual world... or the real world."

He must be talking about the bonds with some people. Kirito was different from Sinon. He had lots of friends who felt the same as him. The girl felt a sharp pain inside her heart, and her words rushed out,

"...Then you might as well just hide here, right? We can't automatically log out in BoB, but we can leave when it's just us and someone else. Once we commit suicide to let the 3rd person win, the tournament will be over."

On hearing that, Kirito widened his eyes, but immediately smiled, said 'I see', and shook his head. Sinon already expected that he would have such a response.

"There is that method. But... I can't do that. Death Gun should be hiding somewhere and recovering his HP. If we let him go until the tournament ends, who knows how many people he will kill..."

"...I see."

"—You're really strong."

Even though he said that he had something he wanted to protect, he didn't lose any of his courage of risking his life to fight against the Death God. And I don't have these two things anymore.

Sinon could only smile weakly, thinking of what would happen to her once she left this battlefield.

Sinon had already lost all her courage once she faced that black handgun that Death Gun raised on the streets in the ruins. She cried many times as she escaped and couldn't even control her separate identity, the Hecate. The ice sniper Sinon was on the brink of disappearance.

If she continued to hide in the cave like this, she would never believe in her own ability again. Her heart would shrink, her fingers would stiffen, and it's unlikely that she would ever hit something again.

Forget about overcoming that memory, the real her in the real world would always worry about whether that man would appear from the shadows of the night streets or the gaps between the door. That would be the virtual and real worlds waiting for Sinon/Shino.

"...I..."

Sinon looked away from Kirito and said softly,

"I'm... not running away."

"...Eh?"

"I'm not running away. I've decided not to hide around. I want to go out and fight that guy."

Kirito frowned, bent his upper body over to Sinon and whispered,

"You can't Sinon. Once you get hit by that guy...you may really die. I'm not just a complete melee-type player, I also have defensive skills. You're different. Your predicament would be far more dangerous than mine if that invisible man attacks."

Sinon shut her mouth for the moment, but soon after, spoke up and concluded.

"It doesn't matter even if I die."

"...Eh..."

Kirito widened his eyes again, and Sinon said slowly,

"...Just now... I was really scared. Really scared that I would end up dying like that. I got weaker than how I was 5 years ago... I even embarrassed myself by screaming... I can't take this. If this lingers on anymore, I might as well die!"

"...It's normal to be scared. Who's not afraid of death?"

"I'm sick of being scared. I'm sick of living in fear... I'm sick of it— I'm not going to ask you to accompany me, I can fight on my own."

After saying that, Sinon's weak arm started to exert force and got ready to get up. However, that arm was grabbed by Kirito beside her. He asked softly with a nervous voice,

"You're saying that you want to fight alone and die alone...?"

"...That's right. This is likely my fate..."

She made a cardinal sin, but wasn't punished for it. Thus, that man would come back to give her the punishment. Death Gun wasn't a dead soul—but a cause and effect. This was already decided.

"Let go of me... I've got to go..."

Sinon tried to shake off Kirito's hand again, but he grabbed her with even more force.

The black eyes were sparkling. Those small and beautiful lips exploded with such intense words that didn't fit the perfect appearance at all,

"...You're wrong. No one will die alone. Once someone dies, his position in someone's heart will vanish too. My heart already has your existence, Sinon!"

"It's not like I asked you to remember me... I, I never hoped to have a relationship with anyone!"

"But haven't we made contact with each other?"

Kirito raised Sinon's hand and moved it in front of her.

At this moment, the intense emotions that were suppressed inside Sinon's icy heart suddenly exploded. She gritted her teeth and used that other hand to grab Kirito's collar.

"Then..."

The weakness of wanting to be comforted and the urge to be destroyed created a feeling she never had before, causing her to say these words out from deep within her. Sinon's fiery gaze stared at Kirito's face and screamed,

"—THEN PROTECT ME FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE!"

Her eyes suddenly twisted, and there was something hot flowing down her face. Sinon then noticed that tears were already flowing out from her eyes, dripping.

She shook aside the right hand that was being held and forcefully clenched her fist to slam at Kirito's chest. Twice, thrice, she exerted all her strength onto Kirito's body.

"You don't know anything at all... couldn't do anything, so stop acting like you know what's going on! This... this is my battle, only mine! Even if I lose, even if I die, no one has the right to lecture me! Or rather, are you going to bear this responsibility with me? Can you..."

The right hand Sinon was just holding reached out in front of Kirito. This hand once squeezed the trigger of a gun that was dyed in blood and took someone's life. Looking closely at the skin on it, she could only see that this hand that once killed before still had the little black dot that was caused by the gunpowder particles.

"Can... CAN YOU HOLD THIS HAND THAT KILLED SOMEONE BEFORE!?"

Lines of curses awakened from deep within Sinon's memories. In the classroom, she would hear 'Don't touch it, you murderer! You'll stain it with blood' when she accidentally touched other people's personal belongings. Ever since that incident, Sinon never let anyone touch her, not even once.

Sinon used the last of her strength to swing a punch. As the entire island was in a battlefield that wasn't protected, every single time Kirito got punched, his HP would decrease little by little. However, he didn't do anything to evade.

"U...uu..."

Sinon's tears fell like rain, and she couldn't control them. She immediately lowered her head to prevent others from seeing her crying face, and in the end, her forehead ended up hitting Kirito's chest.

Her left hand was still grabbing onto Kirito's collar, leaning her forehead onto Kirito's chest with all she had, letting out a crying sound from between the gritted teeth. Sinon was crying like a kid, but she found it inexplicable that she actually had the ability to do this. She couldn't remember the last time she cried in front of someone.

Soon after, Kirito placed his hand on her right shoulder. However, Sinon immediately clenched her fist and swept his hand aside.

"I HATE YOU... I HATE YOU THE MOST!!"

As she screamed, the imaginary tears continued to float, and they were finally absorbed by Kirito's thin chest.

It was unknown how long they maintained this position—

Sinon's tears finally went dry, and she felt weak all over as if her soul was scattered, and could only rest her entire body on the lightsaber warrior's slender body.

After having exposed the feelings she would definitely not allow herself to reveal, the slight pain that came with it felt extremely soothing. She then continued to put her head on the other person's shoulder and continued to pant.

After a while, Sinon broke the silence.

"...You're really irritating... but at least let me lean on you."

After she said that, Kirito merely answered 'ok'. Sinon then moved her body and laid down horizontally on the legs Kirito stretched out. As she was still embarrassed about letting Kirito see her face, Sinon turned her back to Kirito and saw the bullet scar that was still left on the rear right side of the three-wheeler buggy's rear fender, and the last trace of sunset that crept in from outside the cave.

Her mind was still confused, but it was different from how her mind stopped when she was attacked by Death Gun; it was a seemingly relaxed feeling. Unknowingly, she let out a sentence,

"I... I've killed someone before."

Sinon continued without waiting for Kirito's response,

"Not in the game... but in the real world. I really killed someone. The cause was the robbery that happened in the suburb in the northeast 5 years ago... The news reported that the culprit shot a mailman and died after the gun chamber exploded. But in fact, that wasn't true. I was at the scene. I snatched the culprit's gun and shot him."

"...5 years ago...?"

On hearing Kirito mutter his question, Sinon nodded her head.

"Yes. I was 11 then... maybe I could do that because I was a kid then. I had two broken teeth, two sprains on the arms, a back injury and a

dislocation of the right shoulder, but had no other injury. The damage my body took could be healed... but there was a place that couldn't be healed."

"..."

"After that, I would vomit or faint once I saw a gun. Even on the TV, in the manga... or a fake pistol won't do. Once I see a guy... my eyes will immediately remember the face of that guy I killed... It was scary. Really scary."

"...But."

"Yeah. But it's alright in this world. The relapse wouldn't happen... and I even liked..."

Sinon moved her eyes away, looking at the elegant figure of the Hecate II that was lying on the sand,

"...A few guns. So I felt that if I became the strongest in this world, I would become strong in the real world and could forget about those memories... but... when Death Gun attacked just now... I nearly relapsed... that, that was really scary... Unknowingly, I wasn't the «Sinon» in the game but the me in the real world... so I have to fight with that guy. If I can't beat him... Sinon will vanish."

She hugged her own body tightly.

"Of course I'm scared of death. But... but if I continue to live in fear, I'll be scared even when I'm dead. If I run away without fighting against Death Gun and those memories, I will definitely become weaker than before, and I will never be able to live an ordinary life again. So... so..."

Suddenly, a chilly air struck, causing Sinon to tremble violently. At this moment...

"I..."

Unknowingly, Kirito started stammering like a weak kid who didn't know what to do,

"I...I killed people before."

"Eh..."

Sinon, who was leaning tightly onto Kirito, felt his body tremble for a split moment.

"...I did mention it before, right? That mantle guy and I... Death Gun, we met in another game before."

"...Y-Yeah."

"That game was called... «Sword Art Online». Have you heard of it... before?"

"..."

Sinon already guessed the name of the game, but couldn't help but look up at Kirito's face. The lightsaber warrior leaned his back on the wall of the cave, and his eyes that lost all glow were looking above.

Of course, Sinon knew the name of that game. Or rather, there was not any VRMMO player in all of Japan who would not know about that game. That terrifying game trapped the consciousness of 10,000 people inside the game world for more than 2 years, and even took the lives of 4,000 people.

"...Then, you're..."

"That's right, in terms of internet speak, I'm a so-called «SAO Survivor». That Death Gun is the same too. Both him and I fought each other, and we tried to kill each other."

Kirito's eyes looked like they were looking afar in the distant past, moving about in mid-air.

"That guy was part of a Red guild called «Laughing Coffin». In SAO, we designate colors and call criminals «Orange Players», and thief guilds would be «Orange Guilds»...amongst them, those who revel in killing were called «Red Guilds». Those guilds...had a lot of people who enjoyed killing people."

"Bu-But...in that game, wouldn't it mean real death if your HP becomes zero...?"

"That's right, but they killed because of that reason... To certain players, killing was their greatest pleasure. Laughing Coffin was such a group. They killed other players in unprotected battlefields or mazes, took their money and equipment before killing them mercilessly. Of course, the ordinary players started to be wary of them, but these people still continued to think of new ways to kill, causing the number of victims to continue to rise."

"..."

"Thus, the ordinary players finally formed mass-crusades against them...and I was one of them. It was a crusade, but we didn't really need to kill them. We just wanted them to be unable to resist before sending them to jail. We tried all we could to find their base, gathered many high-leveled players who would not have any problems and launched our raid at midnight. However... I don't know how the info was leaked. The enemy had already set traps in the base and waited for us to enter...we finally managed to regroup ourselves, but in this abnormally chaotic battle...I..."

Kirito's body trembled violently again. He widened his eyes, and his breathing became harder.

"I personally killed two Laughing Coffin members. One by hacking him on the head with my sword...the other was a stab right in the heart. I only planned to lock them inside jail, but I forgot all about it and just lost myself...no, that was just an excuse. If I really wanted to, I could definitely stop my sword...but I could only continue to swing my sword in fear and anger, and to be honest, I'm no different from those guys. No, in a certain sense, my guilt is greater than them because..."

Kirito forcefully took a deep breath before exhaling, and silently continued,

"Because I forced myself to forget what I previously did. I killed another member a long time after I killed those two people...and once I returned back to the real world, I never thought of them. That was until I met Death Gun at the presidential area waiting dome..."

"...Then, Death Gun is part of that group you fought against...«Laughing Coffin»..."

"Yes. He should be one of the members who survived in the raid and was locked up by us. I still remember his presence and how he spoke. Just a little...a little more, and I can remember his name from back then..."

This time, he forcefully closed his eyes and used his right fist to press against his forehead. Sinon, who was lying on Kirito's knees, stared at him for quite a while.

This boy called Kirito was once a player of «Sword Art Online».

He gambled his real life in that world and continued to fight for two years.

Sinon herself could guess this already, but it was still strangely heavy-hearted to hear him say this. She could still remember Kirito's question yesterday from deep inside her ears.

—If your bullet can really kill a player in the real world...and he would kill you or someone else close to you if you don't kill him, can you still squeeze the trigger without hesitation in such a situation?

Kirito was a person who went through that. In a certain sense, this was extremely similar to the post office robbery incident where Shino was attacked 5 years ago—

"...Kirito."

Sinon supported her body and forcefully grabbed Kirito on the shoulders. The boy's eyes looked somewhat lost as if he was looking somewhere distant in the past. However, Sinon still brought her face close to force the other party to look at her, and said with a hoarse voice,

"...I can't judge what you did in the past...and I don't have the right to. So actually, I don't have the right to say this...but please tell me...how did you overcome those memories? How did you beat it? How did you become so strong...?"

This was really a rather cruel and selfish thing to say to someone who just revealed his own guilt. However, Sinon really couldn't stop herself from asking. Though Kirito was so self-loathing that he 'forced himself to forget', she couldn't do that.

However—

Kirito blinked twice, thrice, a few times and stared at Sinon's eyes, and he then shook his head and said,

"...I didn't overcome it."

"Eh..."

"Last night, I continued to remember that battle against Laughing Coffin and the 3 people who died under my blade, and I nearly couldn't sleep at all. Those people, when they were about to disappear...their expressions, voices, last words, I guess I wouldn't be able to forget about them..."

"How...how is it..."

Sinon could only mutter blankly,

"Then...wha...what am I supposed to do...I...I..."

'—Am I going to be like this for the rest of my life?

This declaration was really too cruel to her.

Was all her hard work wasted? Wouldn't that mean that even if they left this cave, beat Death Gun and win, Shino in the current world would have to continue to live in pain—was that it...?

"However, Sinon—"

Kirito moved his right hand and covered one of Sinon's hands that were grabbing his shoulders.

"I feel that it's normal. I lost my sanity and killed with my own two hands, but I got praised instead of being punished. Nobody wanted to judge me, and nobody taught me a way to redeem myself. Up till now, I had never really looked at what I did, and just forced myself to forget. But I was wrong. The fact that I did that, I personally slayed them with these hands of mine...I should accept them directly, consider the significance and seriousness. Right now, I feel that this is the least I could do to compensate within my abilities..."

"...Accepting...and reflecting on them...I can't do that..."

"No matter how you try to distance yourself from it, the past will never disappear, and our memories will never really vanish. Even so...we can only face it head on and work hard so that we can one day accept it."

"..."

Sinon's arms lost their strength and she collapsed onto Kirito, who was lying down. She leaned her back and head onto Kirito and looked up at the roof of the cave.

To face that memory head on and fight; Sinon didn't think that she could do that. The path Kirito found belonged only to him, and she needed to find another way to settle her own problems. Even though Sinon thought of these, Kirito's words finally broke through one trouble of hers. The sniper girl turned her eyes to the face that was rather pale in that slightly dark place, and then said,

"...«Death Gun»..."

"Hm?"

"So that guy under the mantle was a real person after all."

"Of course. He's definitely one of the top players of the ex-«Laughing Coffin». If I can remember his name in SAO, I can find his real name and address in the real world. To be honest, this is the real reason why I came to this world."

"...I see..."

At least she knew that the mantle guy wasn't a lingering dead soul that awoke in Sinon's memories. She frowned, thought and continued,

"So that guy couldn't forget about what happened in SAO, wanted to PK and came over to GGO...?"

"I don't think that was merely the case...that guy chose to take action when many people were looking, no matter whether he was shooting «Zekushiido», «Usujio Tarako» or eliminating «Pale Rider». That exaggerated Cross sign was performed to an unspecified lot of audience. He should be indicating...that he had the ability to kill in the game..."

"...But how did he do it...between the AmuSphere and the first generation...Nerve Gear, was it? The AmuSphere was different from the first generation, right, so it was designed not to let out dangerous electromagnetic waves, right?"

"That should be the case...but, according to the person who requested me to come to this world, the cause of death on Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako wasn't brain damage, but heart failure..."

"Eh...heart...?"

On raising this question, Sinon felt a chill brush past, making her tremble slightly. Even though she felt that it wasn't really possible, she wanted to say out what she thought.

"...You're saying that...he used some curse or supernatural power...to kill them...?"

Sinon felt that she would be laughed at if she said it, but Kirito merely looked back at her with a tense expression.

"To be honest...I won't know how he killed them without knowing the player controlling the mantle avatar in the real world and investigating him. I don't think that randomly shooting in the virtual world would make a player's heart in the real world stop...no, wait...speaking of which...."

This may be a habit Kirito had as he used his fingers to stroke his slender chin and shut up. On seeing Sinon giving him a puzzled look while lying on his knees, he said with an ambiguous expression,

"...That's really strange..."

"What's strange...?"

"In the ruins just now, why did Death Gun not use that black handgun to shoot me and use that sniper rifle instead? We were really close just now, and the handgun should be more powerful, right? Besides, it could kill the enemy in one shot. To be honest, I couldn't even dodge a sniper shot. If that guy used the black handgun, I should be killed by him already..."

Though it was somewhat shocking to see him have the courage to consider the possibility of his own death, Sinon still said her thoughts,

"Maybe it's because there was no time to draw the Cross...? Before shooting the Blackstar...ah, that handgun's called «Type-54 Blackstar»..."

Feeling suffocated the moment she said this name, Sinon continued,.

"...Does he have to draw the Cross before firing the Blackstar, or was it that he couldn't kill if he didn't complete the Cross...?"

"Yeah...but when we were running away, that guy did use the Blackstar to shoot you, right? How could he draw the Cross on the horse?"

The moment Kirito said that, Sinon glanced at the three-wheeler buggy beside her. The bullet scar on the rear fender wasn't the .338 Lapua Magnum, but the smaller 7.62mm bullet. Speaking of which, Sinon herself did see Death Gun pull the Blackstar and shoot without drawing the cross.

"That's true...it did happen."

"In other words, Death Gun did have the chance to kill me, but didn't shoot at me. No, he doesn't have any reason to let me go. I won in the preliminaries...to be honest, I'm the more eye-catching one..."

"Sorry for not being so attractive looking."

Sinon gave a left elbow jab at Kirito's abdomen and made him cough dryly.

"Then, let's make it that both of us are eye catching. But anyway, it's not that the guy didn't shoot me, but that there was a reason why he didn't do so..."

"Hmm..."

Sinon moved her body and slumped on Kirito's legs, putting her cupped hands onto her head. Even though the annoyance she had with the boy never decreased, right now, she needed the heat transfer between avatars to chase the black fear away from her. Feeling somewhat safe now, she slowly gained back her peaceful mind and continued to think.

"...Speaking of which, something was weird just now...."

"Just now?"

"At that metal bridge. That guy did use the Blackstar to shoot Pale Rider, yet ignored Dyne who was left helpless beside, right? I thought Dyne would be shot too..."

"Yes...but he was already dead that time, right?"

"He was dead, but actually, it was just that his HP was zero and that he could not move. His avatar was still there, so his own consciousness was still there. If it's a power that exceeds the game, it doesn't matter if the HP was there or not, right?"

On hearing Sinon mention that, Kirito pondered for a while and then said,

"...That's true. It's weird now that you mentioned it. Like the ruins just now, Death Gun only attacked Pale Rider and not Dyne at the bridge..."

"In other words...you and Dyne, Pale Rider and me, we have common points. This player designates between those who he could attack and those he couldn't attack..."

Sinon pondered and muttered. Kirito nodded his head, and the shaking reached her body.

"Yeah, you can put it that way. If we think through it, Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako should have similar conditions to you and Pale Rider...maybe it's ability or ranking..."

"Pale Rider is strong, but he didn't take part in the last tournament. As for BoB ranking, Dyne was in front of me."

"Then...maybe it's because of another specific event?"

"I don't think so. Dyne and I were in the same squadron, so we trained together a few times. But I'd never even heard of Pale Rider's name, let alone met him."

"What about Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako?"

On hearing Kirito's question, Sinon could only turn her body over and give a wry smile. She looked at the serious expression on that pretty face, shrugged her shoulders and answered,

"Those two were famous, on a completely different level from Dyne and me...Zekushiido was the winner of the last tournament, so Usujio Tarako was 5th or 6th, but he was the leader of the largest squadron in this game. I only talked to him once or twice."

"Uu...Then, it should be equipment or stats..."

"Our equipment are all different. You know that I use a sniper rifle, and Pale Rider uses a shotgun. Zekushiido probably uses the extremely rare XM29 assault rifle, and Usujio Tarako uses the light machine gun Enfield. As for stats...ah."

"Hm?"

Sinon seemed like she wanted to explain to the puzzled Kirito as she touched her eyebrows before continuing.

"It's not really a common point...if I have to say it, it's «all those who don't focus on AGI» But that's a little far-fetched...some of us focus on STR, and some focus on VIT..."

"Yeah..."

Kirito curled his beautiful lips and continued to scratch his head.

"So he just randomly picked targets without reason, is it...for some reason...I feel that there's a certain reason...did you say that you once talked to Usujio Tarako? What did you say to him?"

"Well..."

Sinon racked her thinned memory as she cupped her hands between her head and Kirito's legs to act as a pillow. This should be a form of a lap pillow, right? Thinking that, she started to feel embarrassed. But still, she shook her embarrassment aside with an excuse 'it's urgent now'.

Thinking about it carefully, she found that she realized that she never touched other people like that for so long. It was like she put the burden in heart together with her own weight on him, and her heart just felt unbelievably safe. Just when Sinon secretly hoped that this could continue, the seemingly weak smile of Shinkawa Kyouji suddenly appeared in her mind, which made her rather sorry. If she could return safely to the real world, she would open her walled up heart to him and talk with him...

"—Oi, Sinon, what's with you and Usujio Tarako..."

"Ah, um...yeah."

Sinon blinked and shook that fleeting thought away before searching that distant memory of hers again.

"...We really talked only a little bit. I remember...after the last tournament, once we returned to the first level of the presidential building, I met him at the entrance. We started talking for about 2, 3 minutes, about what prize we want...I never met him directly in the battlefield, so that was just random banter."

"I see. Death Gun never appeared in the last tournament... Was he angry that he didn't get the prize...? It doesn't seem useful to speculate about baseless things."

Kirito sighed. He blinked a few times to change his mood and then lowered his head to look at Sinon.

"Speaking of which, I never checked out the prizes...what did you get in the end?"

On hearing Kirito suddenly change the topic, Sinon was somewhat impressed that he would want to know about the prizes at this moment and answered,

"Ah~that could be chosen. We could choose according to our ranking...our rankings are rather good this time, so we should be able to get something good. Of course, we have to get back safely."

"Like what?"

"Of course, guns and defense equipment...or else it would be unique colored dyes or clothing that people can't buy. However, it doesn't seem to be really good, just catchy-looking. They would even send model guns from the game."

"Model guns? In other words, not equipment in the games, but something you can get in the real world?"

"Yeah. I got a really low rank during the last tournament, so I couldn't get any great equipment. I chose the model gun. Speaking of which, Usujio Tarako said that he chose a model gun too...it was just a toy, but it used metal, and the finishing was very good. Shin...Spiegel said this to me. But I..."

On remembering the pathetic state of the model gun she held in her hands a few days ago, Sinon's face couldn't help but give a wry smile.

"—I always kept it inside the drawer and never looked at it carefully."

But Kirito seemed to notice something else and didn't notice the expression on Sinon's face.

"Getting a prize...in the real world...?"

He first whispered to himself softly, and then said in a serious tone.

"That model gun was sent over by the operating company from America, right?"

"Yeah, through EMS, so a lot of shipping fees must be involved. Can Zasker really earn money like this...?"

The moment Sinon finished saying that, she looked at Kirito's face—but couldn't help but blink. She saw the lightsaber warrior biting his lips and looking up at a certain point. It didn't seem that he was thinking about what prize he could get.

"Wha...what's wrong? What are you thinking?"

"...EMS... but—when I logged into GGO a while back, the system only requested for the player to provide the email, gender and age for our particulars. How did the operating company know about the participants' addresses...?"

"Have you forgotten?"

Sinon, who was lying down, raised her hands in a somewhat impatient manner.

"During the BoB preliminaries yesterday. When we had to register at the operating machine at the first level of the presidential building, there was also a blank line to fill our real addresses and names, right? There should be other terms and conditions there. We can register without filling in the address, but we may be unable to get our prizes. You didn't fill it up, right? You can't fill it later, so you can't get the model gun—eh, eh?"

Kirito suddenly placed his hand on Sinon's right shoulder and then brought his face over, causing her to make a strange sound. The girl froze as she thought that this person was about to do something shameful, but of course, that wasn't the case—

The lightsaber warrior gave a serious expression like never before and raised a new question. But Sinon couldn't understand the importance of this question.

"What did Dyne get in the last tournament?"

"We-well... I remember it was equipment in the game. He once showed it to me before, a coat that had ridiculous colors."

"What about Zekushiido?"

"Who-who knows... He never talked to me before. How could I know? But...I heard that the person himself demands on efficiency, so it shouldn't be appearance and stuff. Speaking of which, he could have chosen the model gun too. I heard that the champion and third place could get a large sniper rifle. But...so what?"

However, Kirito didn't answer her question, and merely watched Sinon's eyes before sinking into deep thought.

"Not equipment in the virtual world...a model gun in the real world...if this is the common point between Sinon, Pale Rider, Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako...EMS addresses...machine at the presidential estate...that place was..."

Kirito seemed to be daydreaming as he continued to murmur,

"...Optical camouflage...if...it wasn't just on the practice field..."

The hand Kirito placed on Sinon's right shoulder suddenly became as stiff as stone. He widened his eyes, and his black eyes continued to roll. The expression shown in his eyes was—shock? Or was it fear?

Sinon couldn't help but straighten her back and shout,

"WHA...WHAT HAPPENED. WHAT'S GOING ON?"

"Ahh...so it's like this...so it was like this!"

A deep hoarse voice came out from between the bright red bewitching lips,

"I've...made a grave mistake..."

"Mis-Mistake?"

"...That when playing VRMMOs...the player's consciousness is moved from the real world to the virtual world, and the player then talks, runs and fights inside...so I thought Death Gun most probably killed his targets in this world..."

"That...that's wrong...?"

"No, the player's body and heart doesn't move. What's different about the virtual world from the real world is that only the brain accepts lots of information. The players wearing the AmuSphere merely sees and hears the electric signals being transferred into digital images and sound effects."

"So...Zekushiido and the rest died at where the corpses were, inside their own rooms. And the real killer was at those places..."

"Wha...what in the world are you trying to say...?"

Kirito immediately closed his lips and opened them again. The voice and presence he gave next seemed to reflect his inner fear as it became a freezing air that brushed past Sinon's face.

"«There're two killers» The first one...that mantle guy attacks his target in the game. The second person had already entered the target's room in the real world, and will attack the helpless players at the same time."

Sinon couldn't immediately understand what Kirito meant when he said that. She raised her upper body weakly, went into a dazed phase before shaking her head in an interrupted manner, and then continued,

"But...how...how can that be possible? How do they know the addresses of the players...?"

"Didn't you say it before? A model gun was sent to your house?"

"Then...then the culprit is the operating company...? Or Death Gun hacked into the database...?"

"No....that possibility is too small. Even if it was just an ordinary player, he could still know the address of the real target. Once that target is a participant of the BoB tournament, and if the player chose a model gun..."

"..."

"The presidential building. The players who hope for the operating company to send the model guns to them would input their real name and address over there, right? I was a little worried when I registered... Wasn't it a single room, with a large open space behind, right...?"

Sinon finally understood what Kirito was getting at and could only hold her breath and shake her head.

"You're saying...that he saw the image on the screen from behind? That's impossible. With the distance effect, he won't be able to see the words once there's some distance, and someone will notice him if he was so close."

"But what if he used a scope or binoculars? Someone I knew before said that she used a mirror to read the button code in the game. If I look through some item, I can negate the distance effect, right?"

"What you're saying is impossible. If so many people use some binoculars that way, they would be kicked out by the GM and banned. This is an American game. It's rather strict with this like how it is with regards to sexual harassment."

But Kirito seemed to know how to argue back at this. The lightsaber warrior brought his face closer and then used a soft voice to raise his guess.

"If... What if, that mantle of Death Gun...that «Metamaterial Optical Camouflage» can also work inside the city? The presidential lounge is rather dark. Nobody would discover if they became transparent and hid in the shadows, right? In that situation, if someone uses binoculars or a scope to spy on the screen image...it's possible to spot the address and real name in the entered data, right...?"

"...!"

Invisibility—scope. With these two things, it was possible to do so. Basically, the game menu window on default is that others couldn't see it, but the touchscreen-type terminals in the game could be used by many people, so on the default mode anyone could see the contents. Sinon herself did input her address and name when she registered for the last tournament and this tournament with the anyone-can-see mode. Was someone...no, rather, that Death God wearing the mantle hiding behind her back then? Just to write down other people's names on the list of death?

Sinon really couldn't accept this guess, and thus she continued to try and argue back.

"...Even if they know our addresses in the real world...how can they enter our rooms without a key? And, what about their families...?"

"If it's just Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako, both of them were living alone...and they were staying in old apartments. I guess what's installed on the doors were first generation electric locks which weren't really safe. Also, when diving into GGO, the real physical body would be in an unconscious state. Thus, no matter how much effort he had to use to enter, he wouldn't worry about being discovered..."

Kirito's words made Sinon gasp.

Ordinary houses were only installed with the electric keyless sensor lock like those on cars 7 to 8 years ago. Though it couldn't be broken through physically, the first generation locks' electrowaves were cracked and installed into an opening mechanism, making this device seem like some master key that can unlock all sorts of doors. Sinon remembered from the news in the past that this device could be sold for a high price in the black market. After that, Sinon bought a metal lock and an entrance keypad beside the electric lock, but still couldn't remove that uneasiness on her back.

«Death Gun» wasn't some dead soul that was resurrected from her past memories, and neither was he a game character with a mysterious ability, but a real killer.

As this reasoning continued, the realism came with it, and Sinon's heart started to create another fear that was different from just now. She felt

pressured by this resistance she couldn't explain, and said out the final argument she could think of,

"Th-Then...the cause of death? You said it was heart failure, right? Was there something that could cause the heart to stop and fool the police and pathologists?"

"Maybe they inserted some drug..."

"Then...then they could just investigate to check it out, right? Like some traces of drugs that were injected..."

"...The corpses were only found after a few days, so the rotting was rather serious. And... unfortunately, there are many incidents where hardcore VRMMO players die of heart failure. They often won't eat and would only lie on the bed...if the room wasn't broken into or if there wasn't any money stolen, there would be a high chance that it would be determined to be natural death. The police seemed to have investigated the head of deceased, but they probably never thought that some drugs would be administered...if they never investigated this right from the start, it's unlikely for them to find this evidence."

"...How is it possible..."

Sinon used both hands to grab Kirito's jacket, continuing to shake her head like some disobedient kid.

Planning so hard just to kill people meaninglessly—she really couldn't understand the mental state of the person. Sinon could only feel a huge evil intent in that unlimited darkness.

"That's crazy..."

On hearing Sinon mutter, Kirito nodded his head as well.

"Yeeah...it is crazy. I can't understand it, but I think I could imagine why he wanted to do this. This guy spent so much effort probably to maintain his identity as a «Red Player». I...I could also feel that I was still a «swordsman» fighting on the front lines in Aincrad..."

Sinon immediately imagined—that name that she never heard before should be the floating city in the stage called «Sword Art Online». Immediately she forgot her own fear and nodded her own head.

"...I can understand...I can often see myself as a sniper...but if it's not just that mantle guy, who is his accomplice....?"

"Yeah, I think there's a high chance that the guy is most likely an SAO Survivor. Also, he may be a remnant of «Laughing Coffin»...both of them must work together flawlessly to accomplish such a killer plan...ah, don't tell me..."

Sinon's eyes immediately seemed to be asking Kirito who looked like he discovered something.

"Nothing, it wasn't anything much...it's just that, the Cross action that mantle guy drew...wasn't just to show off to the audience, but also some trick to check the time on his watch. He has to plan the «crime moment» together with his accomplice in the real world. But it would be too unnatural to look at the watch before firing."

"I see...if a mini-watch is on the inside of the wrist, it would be right in front of the eye once it touches the head..."

Sinon finally agreed with this assumption and nodded her head—

Her shoulders were suddenly grabbed by Kirito in front of her. He slowly opened his mouth and gave an even more serious expression,

"Sinon—do you, live alone?"

"Y...Yeah."

"Did you lock up the door and put the chain on?"

"I lock the door other than the electronic lock...but my house is the initial version...as for the chain..."

Sinon frowned and continued to search her memory before she dived in.

"...Maybe I didn't lock up."

"I see...then listen to me!"

As Sinon had never seen Kirito look so worried, her chest immediately felt like it was stuffed with ice blocks and had a chilly feeling throughout her deep inside.

No, I don't want to listen on— though she thought this way, the lips in front of her had no intention of stopping and said something shocking,

"At the ruins, when we were at the stadium, Death Gun already intended to use that gun after you were stunned. And...he really shot the gun at you when he used the mechanical horse. In other words...they were ready."

"Ready...what..."

Sinon asked in a voice which nearly couldn't be heard. Kirito himself nodded and answered softly,

"...Right now, at this moment—perhaps, the accomplice of Death Gun in the real world entered your room, and is waiting for the image of when the gun hits you."

After a long while, Sinon's consciousness finally comprehended what Kirito was saying.

The image around her immediately became blurry. The familiar scene of her room appeared in her mind. She was looking down at her 6mat room like it was an illusion.

The wooden floor tiles that were often vacuumed, the light yellow floor mat, the little wooden table.

The black table lined together with the similarly black pipe bed, facing the wall on the west. The bedsheet was completely white, with herself, still lying on the bed in a sweatshirt and shorts. At this moment, her eyes were closed, and there was a machine on her forehead that was made from twin-layered metal rings. Other than that—

There was also a black shadow stealthly standing there, watching Shino who was dived in. That person who was covered in black completely like a silhouette, but there was a single object that could be seen clearly, in his right hand. It was of a cylindrical shape and made of translucent glass, with a silver needle at its tip—a syringe full of deathly liquid.

"No...no..."

Sinon turned her neck and moaned. Even if the illusion was gone and she returned back to the cave, the glint of the needle in the intruder's hand was still in her eyes.

"No...that..."

This wasn't just the simple emotion of 'fear'. The intense emotion to resist should be running all over inside her body, causing her to continue to

tremble. She couldn't move, and couldn't look around her. She was that weak, yet there was someone she didn't know watching her inside her room. No—that wasn't just it. That person could be touching the skin...looking for the place to inject...

There was a sudden blockage feeling deep inside Sinon's throat, causing her to be unable to breathe. She straightened her back and continued to gasp for air.

"Ah...ahhh..."

The light was leaving her, getting further and further away. A rumbling cry rang in her ears. Her 'soul' seemed like it wanted to leave her virtual body—

"No, Sinon!"

Her wrists were suddenly held forcefully, and there was a shocking voice that rang beside her.

"It's dangerous to auto log out now! Let's do our best...calm down! It's alright. You're not in danger yet!"

"Ah...ahh..."

Sinon opened her eyes that couldn't seem to concentrate, and her arms continued to flail. Finally, she got the person who let the voice out. Her arms were wrapped around the body which had warmth, only wanting to hug that person.

She immediately had this strong and forceful arm grab her back, exerting even more force to steady her. And the other hand reached out, gently stroking Sinon's hair.

The murmuring rang again,

"Before Death Gun's handgun...the «Blackstar» hits you, the intruder can't hurt you. That's the limitation these guys set. But if you log out because of your heart rate or a change in body temperature, there will be danger when you see the intruder's face. So you have to calm down first."

"But...but...it's scary...really scary..."

Sinon continued to cry like a kid and buried her face in Kirito's chest.

As the girl forcefully grabbed Kirito tightly, there was a weak but regular heartbeat from that person.

Sinon continued to try her best to listen to this sound to chase away the terrifying image in her mind. Tokun, tokun, almost a second each worth of heartbeat entered her body. Sinon's crazily beating heart finally went back to being like a regular beat.

As she recovered, she realized that she seemed to be on the same mental wavelength as Kirito, and her fear left her slightly. Even though the fear within her didn't vanish, the sanity that was enough to suppress these emotions was recovering.

"...Have you calmed down yet?"

Behind her, Kirito's deep voice rang as his hand was about to leave Sinon's back. However, Sinon shook her head slightly and said softly,

"Let's just leave it like this for the time being...alright..."

Though she didn't hear the reply, the girl's body again felt the other party hugging her. Every time the slender hand patted her head, there was a warm feeling that was melting the frozen heart of hers bit by bit. Sinon took a deep breath, closed her eyes and relaxed her body.

After maintaining that position for several seconds, she blurted,

"...Your hand, it feels like my mother's..."

"Mo-Mother's? Not like your dad?"

"I have no impression of my dad. He died in an accident when I was a baby."

"I see..."

Kirito's answer was rather short. Sinon forcefully brought her face near Kirito's chest,

"—Tell me. What should we do?"

Her voice was sturdier than what she imagined. Kirito stopped the hand that was patting Sinon's hair and immediately answered her,

"We'll take Death Gun down. With that, the accomplice who's ready to kill you in the real world can't do anything and leave. But you just need to stay here. I'll fight. That guy's handgun can't kill me."

"Is that...really alright?"

"Yeah. I didn't state my name and address when I registered, and I didn't dive in at my own house, and there's even someone beside me. Thus, I'm alright. I just need to beat that guy who broke the rules."

"But...even without that «Blackstar», that mantle guy is tough. You saw him dodge the Hecate's snipe even with a distance of 100m? Maybe he can match you if it's just dodging ability alone."

"Truthfully, I don't have the confidence to say that I'll definitely win...but the remaining choice, like what you said—we'll hide here all this time until there are 3 people, and both of us commit suicide..."

At this moment, Kirito glanced at the watch and Sinon looked at it too. It's 9:40pm. Unknowingly, the scan at 9:30 passed through. It's been about 25 minutes ever since they escaped to this hole.

Sinon looked at Kirito's face and then shook her head slightly,

"I probably can't hide here any longer. The other players should have noticed that we're hiding in a desert cave. There aren't many of them, so we may end up having grenade attacks. Or rather, we've been lucky that we were safe for 30 minutes."

"—I see..."

Kirito bit his lower lip and looked at the entrance of the cave. Sinon watched the side of his face silently and said,

"Since both of us worked together till now, let's just fight together until the end."

"...But...if you're hit by that handgun..."

"That thing was just an old single action handgun."

Sinon was more or less shocked that these words came straight out of her own mouth. That's because that handgun—the «Type-54 Blackstar» was always the sign of the fear that tormented her.

No, the fear never vanished. If it was just a coincidence that Death Gun chose the Blackstar as his split personality, that gun would be the curse Sinon could never shake off. However, at least in this game, the Type-54 handgun wasn't some powerful weapon. It was the increase in fear in her own heart that made her really afraid, that made her lose her original fighting ability.

"—Even if he shoots me, you'll just use that blade to easily knock those bullets back away for me, right? Besides, its rapid fire rate is several times less than an assault rifle."

On seeing Sinon suppress her own trembling and finish what she wanted to say, Kirito gave her a smile that had worry and relief in them.

"Good...I won't let him hit you. But for safety reasons, you better not appear in front of Death Gun."

After using his hand to stop Sinon who was about to argue back, Kirito continued,

"No, I'm definitely willing to fight with you. But Sinon, you're a sniper. Isn't your specialty to snipe from afar?"

"That's true..."

"Then let's do this. During the next scan, I'll appear outside to lure Death Gun over. That guy must be hiding somewhere to snipe me. I'll then use that bullet to find his hiding place, and you shoot him. How about it?"

"...You intend to be bait and spectator at the same time?"

Sinon could only grumble at this overly daring plan, but in terms of their abilities, this may be the best option. A close-ranged type working together with a far-ranged type would definitely cause one side's forces to be worn down.

Sinon took a hard deep breath and nodded her head,

"I got it. So be it then. But before that, you better not get shot to death by Death Gun in one hit."

"I, I'll try my best...but that guy's sniper rifle is almost completely silent, and I can't see the initial bullet line."

"I don't know who said that he wanted to 'predict the bullet line'."

Both of them were still close together. In such a conversation, Sinon felt that the fear that's clinging onto her back was leaving slightly.

Maybe there was a killer who entered her room in the real world—to be honest, she merely didn't look or think about this scary guess. Right now, she could only believe what Kirito said, that the person couldn't do anything once they take Death Gun down. Of course, besides Kirito's words, the virtual warmth he gave to Sinon brought some comfort to her. She will have to leave the hole, separate from Kirito and get into sniping mode alone. She didn't know whether she could maintain this current mental state. Thus, at least she should take more of the other avatar's warmth. Sinon leaned her body closer for the last time.

At this moment, Kirito muttered in a surprised manner...

"Eh...let's forget about that for now. Sinon, there was some red dot blinking at the bottom right corner since just now..."

"Eh..."

On looking over, she could find that it was just as what Kirito said. Sinon thought about what exactly he was talking about, but immediately looked up at bulletspeed. As expected, the object was at the top of the cave. She wanted to jump away from Kirito's legs, but it would be meaningless to do this now, and she could only sigh.

"Ahh...damn it, I was really careless..."

What was floating in the air—was something mysterious, a round aquamarine concentric circle. However, that wasn't a real object, but a glowing object in the game. Kirito, who discovered the same thing, tilted his head and asked,

"Eeh...what's that..."

Sinon shrugged her shoulders and then answered,

"A live camera feed. It would normally show the footage of battles, but now that there aren't many people left, they would come over here."

"Eh...damn it. Was our conversation just now..."

"Don't worry. It won't spread if we don't shout or something—How about we just wave our hands at them?"

Then, she continued with a cold and cruel voice,

"Or will you be troubled about letting some people see this footage?"

On hearing this, a terrified look flashed over Kirito's face, but he immediately slipped through with a stiff face.

"Ah—...no...well...I guess you're the one who should be worried. Speaking of which, those who are seeing this would most likely think that we're girls, right?"

"Uu..."

That was right. After that, she might have to explain to others what was going on. However—that was something that's to be done after they pass through this crisis.

Fuun, Sinon used her nose and snorted and said,

"—The one who panicked after discovering the camera had an uglier look. I don't really care. Well...if there was some rumor that I had some strange liking, at least it would reduce a lot of troubles to me."

"Do I have to act as a girl all the way?"

"Don't say that you forgot. You asked me to lead you by dressing as a girl...ah, it vanished!"

The outside audience can't tell that we were making jabs at each other after seeing us like that, right? As Sinon thought this, the object that represented the live camera feed disappeared as it looked for a new target.

Sinon sighed and then really supported her upper body.

"Ok...time's almost up. There're still two minutes till the next scan through. I'll stay inside the cave, and you go outside to check the device, okay?"

Sinon said as she slowly got up before pulling up Kirito who she used as a chair up till now.

Soon after taking a step back, the cold air of the desert immediately covered her entire body, causing her to shrink her neck back. She picked up her beloved gun beside her foot and then carried the metal gun that had a tinge of warmth in the cold air.

"Ah...speaking of which..."

She looked up after hearing Kirito's voice, and saw the lightsaber warrior frown, looking like he was thinking about something.

"What else? There's no time to alter our plan."

"No...the plan goes on. What I want to say is...Death Gun's real name, or rather, the actual name of the character should be that «Sterben»."

"Yes...right, that's true. Who knows how he derived that name."

"I'll ask if I get a chance to fight him at close range. I'll make a move first then."

The black-haired lightsaber warrior nodded his head as he watched Sinon's eyes. He then turned his slender body around and walked towards the exit of the cave.

This cold feeling that couldn't go away even though I'm carrying Hecate, is it because I'm nervous about facing the final battle, or is it that I'm in danger in the real world—or is it because Kirito left me? Sinon couldn't tell.

She brought her shoulders closer in, breathed in the dry desert air, and then said to the profile that was gradually moving away,

"...Be careful."

That profile's back that was facing Sinon gave a thumbs up on the right hand to answer her reminder.

Chapter 13

Asuna fought against an increasing uneasiness as she continued to wait for the moment to arrive.

Three minutes ago, she logged out from her room in Yggdrasil City, went back to the Dicey Cafe in the real world and then dialed that person's number. After questioning that person and forcing him to log into ALO, she went back to where everyone was gathered. It has been less than a minute since she logged in, but each second just felt extremely long.

"Calm down, Asuna...but you won't be listening to me anyway."

Sitting beside her on the sofa was Lisbeth, and once she said this, Asuna then exhaled slightly before answering in a stiff voice,

"Yeah...sorry. But...I just have a bad feeling. Something big must have happened for Kirito-kun to hide this «Laughing Coffin» incident from us and convert to another world. This is definitely not because of a grudge...maybe there's something dangerous in the real world..."

"After seeing that just now...I can't say that you were thinking too much..."

What Lisbeth referred to was the strange incident that happened in the tournament event of the other world «Gun Gale Online», which was airing on the large screen on the wall that's facing the sofa.

The player in a mantle used this chilling handgun to fire one shot at the other player. And then, the player who was hit suddenly disappeared because of a disconnection. And the live telecast they were watching showed the mantle guy declaring to countless players "Don't forget. Nothing is, over. Nothing, is, over—it's showtime—"

On hearing these words, Klein, who was in front of the bar counter felt extremely shocked, but still indicated with certainty that the player under the mantle was a member of the SAO red guild «Laughing Coffin».

During the two years they wandered in the floating city, Asuna herself went through many large-scale battles, and the crusade alliance against the Laughing Coffin members may be one of the most dangerous ever. In a group battle of players vs players, there had never been a case when more than 30 players died.

To be honest, Asuna herself had forgotten about the details of this battle. However, what left the deepest impression on her was the back profile of the «Black Swordsman» that continued to swing his sword like a devil as he stood right in front of the crusade that was about to collapse. If it wasn't for him—Kirito's fighting, the crusade could have been wiped out.

The duration of the battle was rather short compared to clearing boss levels. After the deathmatch, there were about 10 casualties on the crusaders side, and Laughing Coffin had more than 20 casualties. They locked up the survivors of this red guild into the prison of the Black Iron Castle and then held a little mourning for those who died in battle—after that, nobody mentioned that battle again. No matter who it was, Asuna, Klein or Kirito, everyone forgot about this in their own way. That should have been the case...

...However, the unexpected thing was that it's been a year after SAO was cleared and every player was released, yet the bloodied past appeared right in front of them in such a manner.

In the room, Asuna, Klein, Lisbeth, Silica and even Lyfa, who had no direct connection to this continued to remain silent and wait, waiting for the person who should know what was going on.

Another minute after Asuna logged in again, someone finally knocked on the door. That person probably tried his best to log into ALO after receiving contact. However, Lisbeth shouted 'too slow!' the moment he opened the door, which did reflect the thoughts of the other four people.

"...I, I flew over here directly from where I logged in. If ALO has a speed limit, I'll have my license revoked."

The person who said such a joke was the Undine mage who was like Asuna. His tall and skinny body was wearing a simple robe, and his deep blue hair was casually scattered aside. His gentle and skinny face was wearing silver round glasses.

The man's avatar name was called «Chrysheight». And he, who's considered an ally of Asuna and the rest, had been playing ALO for almost 4 months. However, those who know that his name was formed from the English words that could be translated from his name, «Chrysanthemum» and «Height», were only Asuna and Kirito.

His name in the real world was Kikuoka Seijirou. He was a member of the «Virtual Division» and also an investigator in the «SAO Incident

Countermeasure Team». He assisted Kirito in all sorts of ways after he returned to the real world, and also helped save Asuna, so he should be considered their savior. As for why this person, in such a situation, would come over to ALO to create a new character, was because he said that 'I hope to play VRMMO to get more familiar with you guys, Kirito', only for Kirito to coldly state 'I bet this is for gathering information'. Asuna herself did feel that Kikuoka was a little suspicious, but there was no real need to refuse him. Thus, he, who wouldn't log in often, fought with the rest of the party as an ally. Until today, at this moment.

Chrysheight, no, once Kikuoka Seijirou closed the door, he went to the middle of the room in a familiar manner as compared to 4 months ago.

Asuna stamped her boots and arrived in front of Kikuoka, looking at his eyes that were as kind as the real world and simply asked,

"What happened?"

She called from Dicey Cafe, and said that she wanted to know about why Kirito converted to GGO, so she invited him over to her house in Yggdrasil. But as it was Sunday night, and Kikuoka was a civil servant who's single, it was a little too much to ask of him. Luckily, he was at home, so Asuna didn't need to say even more forceful things to him and managed to solve the problem. He said that he was at home, but his voice sounded really soft on the phone, and the phone had an even softer voice in the background. However, Asuna had no time to think about this. Speaking of which, since he rushed over in less than 2 minutes, Asuna should be the one apologizing for asking him out so suddenly, but the anxiety inside the girl made her ignore those words.

On hearing Asuna go straight into the topic, the eyes behind Chrysheight's delightful round spectacles suddenly blinked a few times. Asuna, who was familiar with Kikuoka, knew that he wasn't just shocked, but that his mind was thinking quickly as he showed this expression.

This mage who looked like a teacher coughed dryly a few times before saying,

"If I have to explain it in details, it may take quite some time. To be honest, I don't know how to begin..."

Just when Asuna was about to give him the 'don't mess around', a little figure appeared from the shadows of the glass cups and teacups on the table. The profile looked up at Kikuoka in an adamant manner.

"Let me help you explain it then."

The owner of the voice was obviously Yui. That face which normally had a cute expression showed a serious expression like Kirito's, and then she said in a silver-bell-like voice,

"The self-proclaimed «Death Gun», or the player «Death Gun» started appearing in the world of «Gun Gale Online» from year 2025, November 9. He shot at the screen in the bar area in the capital of GGO, «SBC Gurokken»..."

Yui began with that and then explained the terrifying situation for another two minutes.

Inside the «anti-crime code area» that makes attacks ineffective, there were two seemingly meaningless shooting incidents. However, what happened then were disconnections that seemed to be triggered by the shooting. The two players who were hit never logged in again. And—in the real world, there were two strange corpses which died at the same time as the shooting.

"...As the news reports only mentioned that the deceased were playing a VRMMO, I couldn't tell if the game was GGO. But as the death symptoms were way too similar, I didn't need to hack into the morgue network system to deduce that the two dead people were «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako». And also, I determined that «Pale Rider», who was disconnected by «Death Gun» 6 minutes 40 seconds ago should be dead in the real world."

Saying that, Yui closed her mouth and leaned on the glass cup beside her. Asuna quickly reached her hand out to cover the pixie's little body and carried her in front of her chest.

From how she researched the public news on the internet, to personal news, being able to make such conclusions and her language ability to use perfect Japanese to say the data out, the AI Yui's completeness would be rather astounding. But speaking of which, though Yui's ability was outstanding, her emotion process wasn't really strong. When she was the SAO «Mental health counseling program», she nearly crumbled as she was unable to handle the fear, greed, evil intent and negative thoughts that came from countless players.

To her, it should be a huge burden to find information about «Death Gun» and process it. Though the urgent situation Yui talked about brought a huge shock, Asuna still silently brought her lips over to Yui and whispered 'thank you'.

It seemed that Lyfa, Lisbeth, Silica and Klein, who were in the same room were all shocked, so everyone remained silent.

At this moment, the one who first broke the silence was Chrysheight's sturdy words.

"...That was really shocking. I thought that this little thing was the ALO support system «Navagation Pixie»... but to gather so much information and make conclusions in such a short time. Little girl...are you interested in ra(Katakana:ラas in the Japanese version)...no, do you want to work for the «Virtual Division»?"

This bespectacled mage was glared at by Asuna after making a careless joke. He immediately raised his hands and said in a defeated tone,

"Sorry. I don't want to beat about the bush now. What the little girl explained...it's all true. «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako» died soon after they were shot by «Death Gun» because of serious heart failure."

"...Oi, Chrysheight-san. Are you the one who requested Kirito to investigate? In other words, you knew about these murder incidents but still asked Kirito to move over there?"

Chrysheight raised his right hand to gently stop Klein, who jumped from the bar counter and approached him. At this moment, his spectacles reflected light, hiding the expression under the lens.

"Hold on, Klein-shi. Kirito and I came to the conclusion that those weren't 'murder cases' after discussing these two incidents."

"What are you trying to say...?"

"Think about that, how do you kill people in a game? AmuSphere's not Nerve Gear. You people should know this best, right? AmuSphere was designed to prevent any damage, so no matter what method was used, it couldn't harm the user's head. It would be even more impossible to stop the heart which wasn't even directly connected to the machine. Kirito and I discussed this last weekend in the real world for a long time, and came to

the conclusion that 'A gunshot in the game couldn't even hurt a real body in the real world'."

On hearing the words Kikuoka said as if he was calming a raging student with calm and perfect logic, Klein could only growl as he went back to the round chair.

Then, Lyfa's hoarse voice broke the silence.

"Chrys-san. Why did you request onii-chan to enter GGO?"

The slender long legs reached out from Lyfa's bright green divided skirt as she stepped on the floor before standing up. Then this top-notch swordsman amongst the Sylphs slowly closed in on Kikuoka like it was a kendo match.

"...You should have felt before...no, you should have realized that there's something wrong now just like us, right? That player called Death Gun has some terrifying secret."

"..."

This time, Kikuoka finally went silent, and at this moment, Asuna said a fact he shouldn't have known.

"...Chrys-san, «Death Gun» is a SAO Survivor like us. And he was also a member of the worst red guild, the «Laughing Coffin»."

The mage's tall and skinny body jerked, and his thin lips gasped.

Even this high-ranking official had to feel shocked. His normally narrow and kind eyes immediately widened. Two seconds later, Chrysheight said with a deep tone,

"...Is this true?"

"Yes. I can't remember his name, but Klein and I can testify as we had taken part in the «Laughing Coffin Crusade». In other words...Death Gun didn't kill in the game for the first time. Could you call it a coincidence?"

"Bu...but...then, Asuna-kun, do you really think there was some supernatural power or curse existing? Did Death Gun use some supernatural power from SAO and used it to kill?"

"Well..."

Asuna could not nod her head immediately and could only bite her lips.

During this time, Lisbeth used this opportunity to say,

"Asuna...does Chrysheight know about SAO? I heard that he was an official involved with the internet in the real world and came to play ALO to research on VRMMO..."

At this moment, Kikuoka himself unexpectedly nodded his head to admit it. Maybe he never intended to keep his identity a secret. He started explaining his position.

"You're right, Lisbeth-kun. I used to work in another job though. I was a member of the «SAO Case Victims Rescue Force» once. Even so...we couldn't think of any counter-action, and is just a group with no real power..."

On hearing him say this, Lisbeth widened her eyes slightly, showing a complicated look on her face.

Chrysheight acted like he didn't do anything, but what he said wasn't true. The «Rescue Force» took action actively in November 2022 after the SAO incident happened, and quickly moved 10,000 victims over to hospitals all over the country. It was said that it was hard to get rooms and fees, but the groups' continued negotiation through soft and hard means caused the government department to take action. Asuna heard from Kirito that this Kikuoka was the center of this group. Right now, all the SAO Survivor knew about the tough fight the «Rescue Force» did, and every single one of them was grateful for what they did.

Being hard-pressed between the anger they had about him requesting Kirito to do such a dangerous job and the fact that he helped them before, Lisbeth and Klein could only remain silent. Asuna herself represented everyone and said silently to Kikuoka,

"Chrysheight...I don't know how Death Gun killed. However, I can't just let Kirito fight alone against this sworn enemy. You can find the real address and name of this player who called himself Death Gun, right? It's not easy, but if we list all the survivors of «Laughing Coffin» and then check whether their houses were linked to the GGO server, or if you ask the contracted network server to provide data..."

"Ho, hold on. There has to be a warrant from the court before we can do these, but it will take quite some time to explain the entire situation..."

Kikouka raised his arms to comfort Asuna, but blinked as if he noticed something and then shook his head weakly.

"No, this can't be done. The data the Virtual Division has on SAO players were the real names, character names and final levels. Their guild name and their... number of human kills were unknown. Thus, we can't find his name and address in the real world just by knowing that he was originally a member of «Laughing Coffin»."

"..."

Asuna bit her lips hard. She did have an impression on «Death Gun»'s manner of speech and actions. She definitely saw him during the crusade and when they were clearing up after the crusade. But no matter what, she was unable to remember his name. No, she never once thought of knowing his name as she wanted to quickly remove the memory of that guild...

"—Onii-chan must be in the battlefield trying to remember his name."

Lyfa suddenly said this.

In a certain sense, this girl was closer to Kirito in the real world than anyone—as she was his kin. She held her hands tightly in front of her chest and continued,

"Onii-chan looked scared when he came back last night. I guess he should have noticed that a member of «Laughing Coffin» was in GGO during the preliminaries yesterday. And he found out that person could really kill someone through some method. So to remember that person's past name and make him stop «PK»...onii-chan would want to put an end to this..."

Hearing this, Asuna gasped slightly.

Though she was a little unhappy, Lyfa's guess should be right. No, Kirito would even think that it was «his responsibility». It was their duty as members of the Laughing Coffin Crusade to stop them from doing evil ever again.

—Kirito-kun, you...you're always like this no matter when...

"This...THIS IDIOT...!"

Klein shouted and slammed at the bar table. The chin that had a full moustache twisted his lips and continued shouting,

"THAT'S TOO SELFISH! IF YOU HAD JUST SAID SOMETHING...IF YOU HAD JUST SAID SOMETHING, EVEN IF I WOULD HAVE TO GO THROUGH HELL, I WOULD HAVE DEFINITELY TRANSFERRED OVER..."

"Yeah...but Kirito-san wouldn't say this. He won't get us involved once he feels that there's danger. He's that sort of person..."

Hearing the crying and smiling Silica say that, Lisbeth beside her smiled and nodded.

"...That is right. He was like that from before... If it's like that, then right now in the tournament, he might be protecting someone from the enemy."

On hearing those words, everyone looked at the large screen on the wall like they were attracted over.

There were scenes of special effects coming out from the guns, but there was still no sign of Kirito's name, and the mantle guy who called himself «Death Gun» never appeared.

Thinking about it carefully, everyone present didn't know how Kirito looked in GGO. If he wasn't even the main character that the camera was focused on which shows the name, but as an opponent fighting on the screen, Asuna and the rest wouldn't even recognize him. However, at least the player namelist on the right side of the screen had Kirito's name on, and the other players were quickly shown to be [Dead], he was still [Alive]. This meant that he was having a savage battle silently with «Death Gun» on this wide lone island that became a battlefield.

Asuna couldn't take part in the tournament even if she converted over to GGO, so she could not help Kirito. But she wanted to do something to support, protect and encourage her lover.

Asuna held the passionate feelings inside her and asked Lyfa,

"Lyfa-chan, Kirito-kun didn't dive in from his own room, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. I only know that he dived into GGO from somewhere in the city."

Asuna herself heard of this from Kirito. The reason why she didn't log into ALO at home but at the Dicey Cafe in Okachimachi was that she wanted to meet Kirito immediately after the tournament's over. Asuna nodded her head and turned to Kikuoka.

"...Chrysheight. You should know where Kirito-kun logged in, right?"

"Ah...well..."

The mage in long robes shook his head and murmured, and that sea-colored hair of his continued to shake with a strange angle. But just before Asuna was about to step forward, he immediately nodded his head and said,

"—Yes, I know. I arranged for the place to log in, so the safety's alright. There's CCTV, and someone is keeping him company all the time. I can guarantee that Kirito-kun's body in the real world won't be in any danger..."

"Where's the place?"

"...Well...that's...in the hospital at Ochinomizu in Chiyoda...but don't be insecure that it's a hospital. I chose that place to allow easy access to an ECG. Of course, it's not like I knew that something could happen to the body..."

Kikuoka continued to say words that sounded like excuses, but Asuna waved her hand to interrupt him and questioned him,

"The hospital in Chiyoda? That one Kirito-kun stayed at as he recuperated?"

"Yeah, that's the one..."

—It was nearby. Right between the Dicey Cafe in Okachimachi and Ochinomizu was Suehirochou. It wouldn't even take 5 minutes to get there by taxi.

Thinking this, Asuna said firmly,

"I want to get over there. To where Kirito-kun is in the real world."

Chapter 14

I separated from Sinon and walked out of the cave. The red color of the sunset in the sky was nearly gone, leaving only the last trace of purple in the night.

I, who always thought that the world of GGO was always in the sunset, was slightly shocked that this world also had late night and looked up in the sky. But after thinking about it, it had to be close to 10pm in the real world, so it's obvious that the night sky would become dark.

There seemed to be no stars in the sky. It's said that there was some large-scale galactic war on this world in the past, and civilization started to decline. Right now, humans could only rely on the remains of past technology to survive. This wide night sky would even make one wonder if the planets in the galaxy were destroyed.

Suddenly, there was a small light that shone in the endless darkness from the south-west direction.

A meteor—of course that wasn't what it was. It was an artificial satellite. Ever since the last civilization shot one up, there had been no one using it now, and it continued to send information.

9:45pm. It was time for the 7th «Satellite Scanner» since the 3rd Bullet of Bullets finals began.

I turned my eyes away from the night, took the thin terminal out from my belt pouch and touched its surface. The screen immediately lit up, and the map of the surroundings appeared on it. This lone island that became the battlefield for the tournament seemed to be completely covered by desert in the north. There were a few rocky hills and little green pastures and also a flat barren land that didn't change. Speaking of which, this place shouldn't be suited for sniping.

After leaning my back on the rock wall near the hole, I tried my best to hide myself and continued to watch the device. Several seconds later, the center of the map showed a light silently. I didn't need to touch it to know that this light represented me—Kirito. Of course, Sinon, who was waiting in the cave beside me never showed up on the map.

Unexpectedly, there weren't other players who were alive in this desert in a 5km radius around me. Even if «Death Gun»—«Sterben» would use the «Optical Camouflage» and not appear on the map, the other players who

realized that Sinon and I were hiding in a desert cave should be gathered nearby and would be ready to lob grenades into the cave.

This doesn't sound necessarily great—but there were countless grey light dots shown all over the desert. These should be players who have retired, but there were so many «dead bodies», and yet we didn't hear any sound of battle from the cave. Speaking of which, it's really unbelievable.

I hurriedly adjusted the receiver's magnification and found that there was a light dot 6km southwest. After touching it with my fingertip, the name shown was «Yamikaze». This name seemed familiar.

Looking down even more, I found out that there were a few dark dots and two light dots that were fairly close. The survivors were «No-no» and «Fernil». I then increased the range to display the entire island on the screen. However—there were no more lights. Even the player Sinon called «CampeRichie», who occupied the peak of the southern hills ever since the beginning of the tournament had become dark. Also, there were two dark dots near him. It seemed that he was ganged up on.

In other words, including Sinon and Death Gun who didn't appear on the map, there were only 6 people left in this wide battlefield.

Of course, there could be a possibility that the other players were hiding in caves or underwater, but without the unique ability of Death Gun, they wouldn't be able to receive information from the satellite. Also, at this moment where the tournament's about to end, there shouldn't be anyone who's patient enough to not take a look at the current standings…

"…Ah."

Just when I was thinking about this as I watched the receiver, there was a sudden important change on the screen, and I couldn't help but hold back my cry.

This wasn't because the number of light dots increased. In fact, it was the opposite. 2 light dots in the ruins nearby suddenly went dark.

These two people probably didn't realize that another person was nearby. And after seeing the screen, they realized that the enemy could be behind a wall where they were. They then hurriedly threw a grenade and caused both sides to die—or that's how I think it went. If this were really the case, these two experts who fought like this until now were probably depressed

over having to be eliminated like this. I had to hold back my urge to pray 'Amen' to them and send them off.

Anyway----just like that, the battle royale that originally began with 30 players was now left with four. Also, shown on the screen was just Yamikaze and me.

I finally counted the number of light and dark dots that were scattered all over the island.

And then gave a low moan.

"Eh…"

I hurriedly counted again, but no matter how I counted, the number never changed. The receiver screen showed only 2 surviving white dots. And also, the number of dots that were eliminated was 24.

The numbers didn't tally. Beside Sinon and Death Gun who didn't appear on the screen, there were only 28 people. Even if we count «Pale Rider» who disconnected and disappeared after being shot by the handgun, there should be only 29 people. There's still only one person left.

Did someone betray my expectations and hide inside a cave or underwater? Otherwise…

Death Gun «erased» another player.

No. This shouldn't be possible. Death Gun's avatar, his accomplice in the real world should be waiting in Sinon's house or somewhere nearby. I didn't think of using Sinon as bait, but Death Gun's accomplice can't move to other targets' houses like that.

—No, maybe…did I leave out something important…?

No. Now's not the time to hesitate. I closed my eyes hard and shook aside the cold air that surrounded me.

Once I opened my eyes, the light dots that were shown on the screen were starting to flicker. It seemed that the satellite was about to leave soon. Maybe…no, I don't think I need to do another scan. I silently said farewell deep inside to the satellite which worked hard and immediately looked around. Under the desert that was covered in slight darkness, there wasn't anything that could move or was glowing. I placed the device that lost its

information back into the belt pouch before turning around and walking back to the cave.

The girl who was carrying the large sniper rifle didn't hide at the bottom of the buggy, but was waiting at the right corner of the cave.

"So? How is it?"

Sinon shook the short aquamarine hair that was tied to both sides as she asked anxiously. I tried to clearly and simply explain the entire situation to her.

"Two people took each other out during the scan, so all that's left should be 4 of us: me, you, «Yamikaze» and «Death Gun» who didn't appear on the screen. Yamikaze's 6km down southwest, and Death Gun should be moving over from a certain point in the desert. Also, there may be someone hiding in the cave like us."

I really couldn't say my suspicion that someone could have died by Death Gun's hands. Sinon herself didn't seem to notice my worry as she muttered while looking somewhat surprised,

"…Only 4, 5 people left…"

But she then nodded her head and said,

"It's been past 1 hr and 45 minutes. In the estimated 2 hours the tournament would likely take, this progress would be able to meet that. However, it's really strange that no one threw a grenade in here…"

"Yeah…those who were searching for us were probably dealt with by Death Gun using the sniper rifle. There were a lot of grey dots all over the desert."

"In that case…that guy should get the Max Kill award."

After shrugging with a complicated look, Sinon seemed to be motivated again and said this,

"Forget about that. The problem now is «Yamikaze». You're the only survivor who appeared on his terminal, so he'll definitely come for you."

"I think I heard that name before…is he strong?"

After I asked, Sinon gave an incredulous look,

"The second place in the last tournament. He's a super AGI boost type. Called the «Devil of Run and Gun»."

"Ru…run and gun?"

"«Run and Gun», running and shooting as he continues to move. His weapon is the extremely light submachine gun «Calico M900A». He lost to the rare gun and defense equipment Zekushiido had the last time and got second, but some would say that Yamikaze's skills were stronger."

"This…this means that he's the strongest player in the GGO Japanese server…"

Thinking about it, since he's able to make his way to the end of the battle, he should be extremely strong. Just when I was thinking about this, Sinon brought that sort of determined voice into my ears,

"Well…you just said that the real killer was «Death Gun»'s accomplice in the real world, right? If your guess is correct, Death Gun can only kill me because the accomplice's in my house."

"…"

I was a little, no, perhaps rather shocked as I watched her face that reminded me of a cat-like animal.

An unknown killer was ready to harm her body in the real world. The fear in this situation may even surpass the bind I had with the Nerve Gear and the rules of the death game I experienced. At this moment, Sinon's blue eyes were showing fear, but I could see the glint that's fighting against it. She continued to say in a cool tone to me, who was dumbstruck.

"Anyway, this means that we don't have to worry about Yamikaze being killed by Death Gun. Then, even though I'm sorry for Yamikaze, we can also use him as bait, right? If Death Gun uses the L115 to snipe Yamikaze, we can find his location. This is much more effective than you going alone as bait…and basically, I'm doing something similar."

The last words should be referring to how she's holding Death Gun's accomplice in the real world. Even though she trembled a bit at the end, it's impressive that she had the concentration to finish it off.

"…You're really strong, Sinon."

The sniper girl blinked and then smiled,

"…I just didn't think about that. I was always good with ignoring things I'm scared of."

Then, she immediately said something else to cover over that dig at herself.

"Anyway, how's that strategy? I think it's a situation where we have to use it."

"Yeah…that's true. I agree with your strategy too…but…"

I bit my lips slightly and then said a doubt that remained in my heart a few minutes back.

"…There's something I'm worried about. During the satellite scan just now, I counted the number of survivors and those eliminated. There were 28 people. Even if we include Pale Rider, there's still one less player."

"…Don't tell me, Death Gun killed someone else after that?"

Sinon widened her eyes, but immediately shook her head.

"Tha…that's impossible! The accomplice's target should be me, right? The outside's not a virtual world. How can he move to such a place so quickly? Was another player in the same apartment as me?"

"Yo…you're right…but thinking about it, this is really a bit unnatural…"

I glanced at my watch. It's been two minutes since the scan ended, thus I quickly mentioned all the doubts on my mind clearly,

"About 30 minutes elapsed from the moment Death Gun shot Pale Rider and got ready to shoot you near the stadium. In other words, Pale Rider in the real world should be living about 30 minutes away from you. Of course, this isn't impossible, but don't you find that it's too much of a coincidence?"

"…But, that's just a possibility."

I said the doubt that crept up my mind during the satellite scan to the frowning Sinon.

"No. Listen…maybe there isn't just one person as Death Gun's accomplice. If there were multiple «task forces», even if someone stayed behind to attack you, he can also harm another target. In other words…we can't deny the possibility that Yamikaze is a target of Death Gun."

"…!"

Sinon gasped and hugged her huge sniper rifle hard. She shook the face that showed a little white light in the slightly dark space.

"Ho, how's that possible…? Are you saying that there are at least 3 people who're taking part in this horrifying killer plot?"

"…There were at least 10 survivors from the ex-«Laughing Coffin» guild. Also, those guys were locked in the same jail for almost half a year. Maybe they exchanged contacts in the real world…to be a little extreme, they had enough time to thoroughly go through with this plan. Of course, not all 10 people can take part…but we have no proof to decide that there is only one accomplice."

"…Why…why must they plan so much just to continue this «PK»…? They just got released from the death game, so why…?"

On hearing her trembling vice, I used my dry throat to squeeze an answer out.

"…Maybe it's the same reason why I wanted to be a «swordsman» and why you wanted to be a «sniper»…"

"…"

I thought that Sinon would be angry, but she merely bit her lips. Then, her slender body stopped trembling, and her blue eyes were giving off a strong glow.

"…If that's the case, we have all the more reason to not to lose to these guys. I just used the word «PK», and I want to take that back. A lot of people are PKing in this game, and I joined a squadron that was based on this. However, PKing has rules and realizations. Killing completely unconscious players who dived in through drugs isn't PKing. It's just despicable crime…just killing."

"Yeah…that's right. We can't let these people continue on like this. We have to beat «Death Gun» here and make him pay for his crimes with his accomplices in the real world."

In fact, half of these words were said to myself.

That's right—that's my top priority. I have to start all over here. This is to redeem myself for killing two people in my madness that night and taking another person's life after that.

This should be a battle I have to face alone, but this sniper girl got completely involved. I could only watch her silently.

If her safety's the priority, we can make Yamikaze fight Death Gun and immediately suicide once one of them wins. However, the worst thing was that the tournament would still go on if that person who didn't appear on the map wasn't Death Gun's victim, but was hiding underwater or in a cave. And Death Gun would take down Yamikaze and then shoot at Sinon who's unable to move while I'm a corpse for the time being. Also, if Yamikaze was Death Gun's target, we would only end up increasing the number of victims.

Thus, I have to fight. I want to protect Sinon, deal with Yamikaze, and beat Death Gun. This isn't easy, but I have to complete all these—

As I thought about this, Sinon herself said with an adamant voice,

"Leave Yamikaze to me then."

"Eh…"

"That guy's strong. Even you can't beat him immediately. Besides, Death Gun will use this opportunity to show up when you two are fighting."

"That…that's true, I guess…"

Sinon saw me give an ambiguous expression, released the gun from her right hand and then patted on my chest.

"Besides, you must be thinking about protecting me."

I was unable to say anything back as these words hit the target. The small mouth of that sniper immediately smiled, but then scowled again.

"Stop joking around. I'm the sniper. You're the supporter. Just help me find the enemies' positions. Leave Yamikaze and Death Gun to me."

I don't really understand a small part of these words, but I could only give a wry smile and nod my head,

"I see. I'll leave it to you then… I guess both of them should be nearby. I'll ride out in the buggy. You'll leave the cave a little later and find a spot to snipe."

After we confirmed the plan we had a while back, Sinon nodded her head.

This time, the serious expression returned to her face. The girl looked at me straight on from the front and then said simply,

"I'll leave it to you then, partner."

Sinon set her beloved Hecate's scope into night vision mode and then placed her right eye on it.

In this vast desert, there wasn't anything moving around at that moment. However, Yamikaze in the southwest side and Death Gun, whose whereabouts are unknown, should be approaching this place.

Sinon chose a short hilly peak as the sniping area, and right below the rocky hill was the cave they were hiding in just now. It was hard to spot this place from the ground, and she could get a birds-eye view all around. However, there is the risk of danger. Though it's a short hilltop, the peak's still more than 10m tall from the ground. Someone like Sinon, whose VIT isn't high, can't jump down just like that. Also, there's only one way to get up to here. If the enemy was nearby, she could be pierced through by bullets with nowhere else to go.

However, now's the time where she should shake away all negative thoughts. The sniper continued to try and keep herself calm as she stealthily turned her beloved gun to the right.

Thus, she spotted a figure right in the middle of a large sand dune.

The night wind that continued on and off blew his waist-length black hair at times. He's wearing a black army uniform on his slender body, making him look like he was about to mix into the darkness. That profile was more of an elf swordsman in the middle of a fantasy desert rather than a soldier with a gun.

Right in front of Kirito was the transport both of them took from the ruins to here—the three-wheeler buggy. It didn't have much fuel when it ran out of the cave, so it shouldn't be able to move now. However, the buggy still fulfilled its duty obediently until the end. Its massive frame was used as a

cover by Kirito. It's easy to spot, but people couldn't really snipe him from the north easily.

The rocky hill Sinon was hiding at was on the south side of where Kirito was, and this was a location that had only a few attack options. In other words, Death Gun's L115 could only attack from the west and the east. Also considering that Yamikaze was coming over from the west, Death Gun would probably take action from the east. That should be what Kirito was thinking. His face that didn't look any different from a girl when looked from afar was facing the blueish-white moon that was gradually moving up through the hole in the thick clouds.

Death Gun would probably not use the stun bullets when sniping Kirito, but use the .338 Lapua Magnum. It would almost guarantee an immediate death once that kind of bullet hits the head or the heart. Even if it only hits the limbs, the impact damage would cause half the HP to be gone. Also, Kirito would find it hard to dodge this attack. Death Gun's first bullet didn't have the bullet line, and he could also use the «Metamaterial Optical Camouflage» to hide and snipe. Of course, there would be footprints on the sand, so he couldn't move to a position where he could get a sure hit. But even so, Death Gun had an overwhelming advantage.

—But, if it's you.

You, who cleared that «Untouchable Game» when we first met and could even slice Hecate's bullet from point blank, you'll definitely be able to dodge it, Kirito.

Sinon said this to him in her heart, and then turned her eyes back to the rifle.

Her job was to allow Kirito to maximize his concentration. Thus, they had to quickly deal with the strongest AGI-type attacker, Yamikaze that was closing in from behind.

If they had time and if the situation was safe, maybe Yamikaze would personally avoid trouble or even help out if they explained things to him. However, it would be extremely impossible to make him believe that there's a real killer incident in the final stage of the BoB. If Sinon herself didn't witness Death Gun and feel the chill on being aimed at by the Blackstar, she would only laugh at what Kirito said.

Thus, they could only take down Yamikaze. Zekushiido didn't take part in this tournament, so almost everyone would think that he's the player with the highest chance of winning. And she had to kill him in one hit.

…Can the me right now really do this?

Sinon used her naked right eye to look through the entire vast desert as she tried her best to resist the doubt and fear that was slowly creeping up on her. All the snipes she made on the three-wheeler buggy when they escaped from the ruins were pathetic. She couldn't even hit the mantle guy, and even the hit on the truck's gas tank was merely a coincidence. All the pride Sinon built up till then was immediately wrecked at that moment.

As a sniper, Sinon's role is to gather up the number of kills and practice her refined sniping techniques. One day, when she could win in the BoB tournament, the Asada Shino in the real world will feel real strength. At that moment, she could then give up her fear of guns, wouldn't think about it and could live on normally. She always believed that ever since she accepted Shinkawa Kyouji's invitation to GGO.

However, this wish may be off the mark.

Unknowingly, she had already thought that she separated her heart into two different existences, «Sinon» and «Shino», forming the strong Sinon and the weak Shino. But this was wrong. Sinon in the game still had the weakness that's left in the real world, so she was afraid of that Blackstar handgun and missed that snipe.

Anyway, what she was looking for was «herself». After meeting this enigmatic boy Kirito, she finally found this out. Perhaps he definitely was this sort of person in the real world. Fighting his own weaknesses, fighting all the time, even if he didn't have a lightsaber at his waist.

In that case, Shino in the real world should originally have that tough personality she had in the game.

—I shall fire this bullet as the ordinary person Shino. Just like that incident 5 years ago.

I continued to escape that moment, just wanting to forget, erase it and close my eyes, just wanting to vandalize it with pens.

But I won't do that again. I want to look at my own memory and crime, back to that moment, and build on from there. Maybe this was the moment I had always been waiting for.

In that case—

Now's the moment.

Sinon's right eye captured the black profile that was quickly moving over through her scope. «Yamikaze» was there.

She immediately placed her fingers on the trigger. However, she still couldn't exert force yet. There was only one chance to snipe. There's no time to move and readjust her position.

If she missed, Yamikaze would definitely aim for Kirito. At that moment, no matter how strong Kirito was, he couldn't handle both Death Gun and Yamikaze. He would definitely be taken down by one of the two. Then, Death Gun would just need to deal with Yamikaze and easily use the Blackstar to attack Sinon just as he planned. The virtual 7.62mm bullet would hit Sinon, and once this image was sent to the screen telecasting this in the outside world, the accomplice in the real world would inject the fatal drug into Shino's body and cause her heart to stop.

In other words, this one bullet could decide Shino's real fate. Just like that time.

However, she felt unbelievably calm. Maybe she just couldn't understand the entire situation, but that's definitely not just it. She's not alone. A certain someone, a certain strength was supporting her. There was a slight heat that was warmly melting those stiff and numb fingers. What was this—

The Hecate II. This other half of her who went into numerous battlefields with her, the one and only alter ego of her.

…Ah, I see. So you were always accompanying me. Not just in the hands of a sniper…but also being with an ordinary girl like me. You still continued to encourage me even though I can't see you.

…Please. Lend this weak me strength. Grant me strength to again move on from here.

In Aincrad, the floating city that had already disappeared, we fought hard in there, and every day, the swordsmen of the attack group would find «Outside System Skills» when they battle and train.

For example, when dueling, there's the «prerecognition» that comes with the position of the sword and the avatar's center of gravity, the «insight» that can predict the attack patterns of monsters from long range and through the attack pattern, the «Distinguish» that allows players distinguish the enemy's sound effects from the background sound and find them, the «mislead» to lure the AI monsters' learning capacity and give it a heavy burden, the «switch» that allows multiple players to switch positions and allow them to recover their HP.

And amongst these skills that weren't listed in the ability column, the hardest skill to get, and even treated as a supernatural one was the «presence sense»—also called «Hypersense».

That's to feel the presence of the enemy before seeing and hearing first. It's also a skill to «sense killing intent».

There's one group who denied the existence of this skill since logically, it's impossible to detect this so-called killing intent in the virtual world. Humans who were dived in could only use the digital data Nerve Gear sent over to identify the world, so all the information codes in this game could be changed into a process. Of course, that would mean that there couldn't possibly be vague things like killing intent or sixth sense.

Their reasoning was actually logical. Even I wouldn't really agree that the «Hypersense» skill exists.

However, during the 2 years I fought in Aincrad, I did experience what could be said as «a sense of killing intent» a few times. I didn't see or hear anything, but I just had the feeling that someone was watching me and didn't move further into the dungeon. In the end, I did manage to save my own life a few times.

Earlier this year, I mentioned this once to my «daughter» Yui. Yui was once the affiliated AI to the «Cardinal System» that operated SAO, and she definitely indicated that in SAO and «The Seed» program that was derived from it, there weren't any other methods of knowing the existences of monsters other than the five senses.

—Thus, I shouldn't be able to notice the enemy if he hid silently in a place I couldn't see. Thus, I explained the thoughts I had for a long time to Yui.

Players who dived into VRMMO would use the game server signal that's constantly far away from them, to check «their» own status. When moving alone in a wilderness or dungeon, they could only check their own data. However, if someone tried to ambush the player, access of the status signals would become twice or more. At this moment, the system process would become slower, and finally causing a slight delay in transmission, and this could possibly be the «killing intent» I felt—

After hearing my guess, Yui showed a doubtful look and then said that if the server became slower due to this level of processing, it would be eliminated. However, she later added that to put it bluntly, she couldn't dare to deny this possibility completely.

In the end, maybe it's more convincing to say that it was some supernatural power.

But now in this situation, I couldn't care about such reasoning.

Having played so many VRMMOs, this was the first time I was forced to only rely on the «Hypersense» skill.

Far up in the sky that had the last remaining light in it, I could see the blueish-white plate hanging high up in the blurry sky. It's a full moon today, but maybe it's because the thick clouds covering it that it felt even darker than Alfheim. The silhouettes of the sand dune were half merged into the night, and it's difficult to even tell whether the silhouettes were cacti or rocks.

If... If someone was hidden behind these objects and points the gun that had a sure-kill ability, I may be unable to spot him with my naked eye. Also, the enemy who's ready to snipe me also had an advantage of being able to become completely transparent. The only thing I could hope for visually was the footprints that are going to be imprinted on the sand. However, even I can't see the distance more than 1km away if I want to see it. Also, the footsteps that can be heard when the enemy's moving will be blown away by the wind and won't reach my ears.

—Then, I might as well close my eyes and cover my ears.

I shook my fear aside and silently closed my eyes. Then, I removed the wind, the dry cold air and the rolling of the sand beside my feet out of my consciousness.

Then, there was a sudden movement far away. Someone was running really quickly. The direction was from the southwest side, so this was «Yamikaze» instead.

I tried my best to hold back the impulse to chase after his profile. Yamikaze was Sinon's prey, so she'll definitely stop him. Thus, I removed the footsteps behind me through my consciousness and gather all my senses from the front, desperately increasing my concentration to feel any possible «changes».

Ah…that's right. I remember it now. During that night where we had the Laughing Coffin Crusade, I didn't notice those guys' ambush because of any visuals or sounds. I just had a «bad feeling». I then instinctively turned around and found that there were some shadows moving through the fork of the dungeon.

What was the name of that guy who led the charge against us again? It was not the leader of Laughing Coffin, «PoH». He wasn't around that time if I remember correctly. Most likely, it's a certain cadre. That guy's weapon was an «Estoc» that was thin like some type of needle, a weapon that strengthened its piercing ability without the blade. It swayed as it brought its sharp tip at me, and it was even giving off a small glint of light…

Did I kill that guy the last time? No, I don't think so. After I wore his HP down to less than half, that guy switched with his partner and slowly went backwards.

Before he left, he should have said something to me. It wasn't some big words or something, but a stuttering, ear-piercing voice that sounded like some 'shuu shuu' voice in little parts.

"…Kirito. After this, I'll definitely, kill you finely."

—That manner of speech, that presence, and those eyes that let out the red glows under the hood—

Suddenly, there was a sharp painful feeling that's right between my eyebrows.

It's this kind of feeling. This thing that's targeted at me, this icy-coldness that's merciless and sticky—killing intent.

I immediately opened my eyes.

Far away in the desert, underneath a cactus that's slightly north in the east direction, a sudden glow bursted brightly.

Was that the sword tip of an Estoc or the flare of a sniper rifle being fired?

I turned my body to the right. No, once I was about to tilt to the right, the attack force that had shocking intensity gathered on my forehead. The flow of time started to change. That extremely heavy feeling felt like it could even freeze the air—

The bullet that was rotating at high speed, grazed past my temple cutting off a strand of my hair and flew behind me as I tilted slightly.

"Oh…OOOOOOOOOO!!!!"

I abandoned the remaining trace of black hair that was in the air and kicked at the sandy ground hard with a roar.

—Fast!

Though her scope finally managed to catch sight of «Yamikaze»'s profile, his fleeting speed far exceeded Sinon's expectation. With his AGI stat boosted to the max and the dash skill raised to the maximum level, that shocking movement speed made him really look like some black whirlwind.

The equipment that's worn on Yamikaze's little body was a dark blue uniform that had the lowest amount of protection. He didn't bring any support weapon, and only a plasma grenade on his waist. This person didn't even wear a helmet and showed his thin face. His long and thin arms were holding the M900A, and together with his upper body that was tilted forward, he didn't shake at all even when running. That speed which left only an afterimage as he continued to run was more like a «Ninja» than a soldier. Also, he wasn't just fast—he never stopped.

Even players who have extreme confidence in their own speeds would find a place to cover after running a while, look around to observe their surroundings before continuing. To a sniper like Sinon, the moment he stops would be the best chance to snipe.

However, even though Yamikaze also used cover like cactus and rocks, he never even stopped. He knew that continuous dashing would be the safest defense for a character that focuses on AGI.

…what should I do? Should I predict his movement and shoot? But Yamikaze's not running in a straight line. He's running over sand dunes and peaks; this trajectory can't even be predicted. Or maybe I should aim my first bullet at his feet and take care of him while he gets down for cover? To a seasoned veteran like him, this old-fashioned trick may or may not work. Also, from the second bullet on, the enemy could see the «bullet line». Should I really abandon the greatest advantage of a snipe weapon—the first shot without a bullet line?

Sinon hesitated. However, this hesitation wasn't of the fear and perplexity like on the three-wheeler buggy. Her mind was rather cool and collected. The wooden stock of the Hecate brought a smooth feeling to her face, and that, together with the fact that the boy standing with his back to Yamikaze believed in Sinon, gave her strength.

She shouldn't gamble and shoot Yamikaze that's running around…

After hesitating for a while, the girl made this conclusion and slightly relaxed her finger.

She would only squeeze the trigger once she was certain that she would hit the target, or else it wouldn't be called a snipe. As Kirito entered the range of the M900A, Yamikaze may stop, and until then, she had to wait for that moment.

The blue ninja was less than 1km away from Kirito. But once Kirito didn't react even if his back is facing him, he would feel that Kirito didn't discover him and continue to get close until the 100m shooting range where an AGi-type player would be most adept in.

—I'm also going to hold on until that moment, so you have to be patient too, Kirito. Trust me.

In this battle royale where they couldn't use communication equipment, Sinon could only pray this deep inside her heart. However, she had a thought that she passed her feelings to him. The sniper then started to stop thinking and brought herself as one with Hecate, letting her vision merge with the scope, and the feel with the trigger. At this moment, even the feeling of herself breathing left her. The only thing she felt was the target that continued to dash and the crosshair reticle that was constantly trying to track his heart.

She couldn't even tell how long it took.

Finally, the moment she waited for arrived.

A white light came from the rear right corner of her eyes. That was a bullet, but naturally, it didn't come from Hecate, but the .338 Lapua bullet Death Gun shot from the east side of the desert. Kirito dodged the attack, and the L115's bullet line went near Yamikaze who was approaching from the west.

Yamikaze didn't think that Kirito noticed him, but didn't even expect another huge bullet to fly in and pass the target. Then, he naturally got low and crouched down to stop suddenly and got ready to head at the rock nearby, right behind him.

This would be the first and last chance to snipe him.

The finger that was half following the Hecate's own will started to squeeze the trigger. The light green «bullet circle» showed up in her eyes, and the circle immediately became small as a dot. Sinon aimed for the center of the chest. After squeezing the trigger, the hammer slammed the firing pin, and the powder of the .50BMG inside the chamber exploded, CHANK, and the large bullet immediately went into supersonic speed—

Yamikaze's eyes noticed the muzzle flash that came from the Hecate and Sinon's right eye that was looking through the scope. His eyes seemed to show shock, regret and definite admiration. Then…

The ninja who was the most likely to become champion had a blinding light of special effect on his chest. His avatar was sent flying several meters away and then rolled on the sand a few times before stopping face up. At this moment, the M900A left his right hand, and the grenade rolled onto the floor. As the [DEAD] tag appeared above his abdomen and started to spin—Sinon herself had turned 180 degrees together with the Hecate.

—Kirito!

She wordlessly called this name out.

The black-clothed swordsman was running at the blueish-white moon that was starting to appear on the horizon.

His running motion was completely different from Yamikaze's clean posture. That straightened back while keeping the chin down as he ran forward felt just like dancing. Kirito's right hand moved to pull the lightsaber

on his waist. The blue and purple blade that immediately extended added some color to the darkness.

The direction Kirito was heading to flashed a weak orange glow. It was the firing flame.

The lightsaber drew an arc and knocked aside the bullet that flew over, again and again. Kirito was already able to see the bullet line after dodging the first bullet. No matter how many times the bolt action sniper rifle continued to fire rapidly, it couldn't pierce through the outstanding reflexes of the lightsaber warrior.

Sinon removed the nightvision mode of the scope and increased the magnifier to the maximum level to try and find the position of the bullet.

—Got it. Below the tall cactus. That unique suppressor that's reaching out from under the mantle clothing and the cleaning rod that's under the barrel. This person is the user of the L115A3 «Silent Assassin» and the real killer «Death Gun».

Sinon tried her best to widen her right eye to fight off the fear after seeing his profile.

…You're not a dead soul. No matter how many people you killed in «Sword Art Online», how you're a lunatic who came up with such a terrifying plot when you went back to the real world, you're still a human who can breathe through your nose and has a beating heart. I'll fight with you then. I believe that my Hecate and my power's enough to beat you and the L115.

Sinon pulled the bolt handle and aimed her beloved gun, which now was reloaded, deep at the mantle guy who's lying on the ground.

Though she could see his flickering red eyes through the scope, those definitely weren't the ghost lights of the dead, but the lens of the full face-type goggles. What's under the goggles was just a mere avatar's face.

Sinon's fingers touched the trigger and exerted force slightly.

Death Gun's head immediately moved for a moment. He could see the bullet line. After the attack on Yamikaze just now, Sinon had already exposed her position. However, this just made both sides end up in equal circumstances. Now—

Time to decide this!!

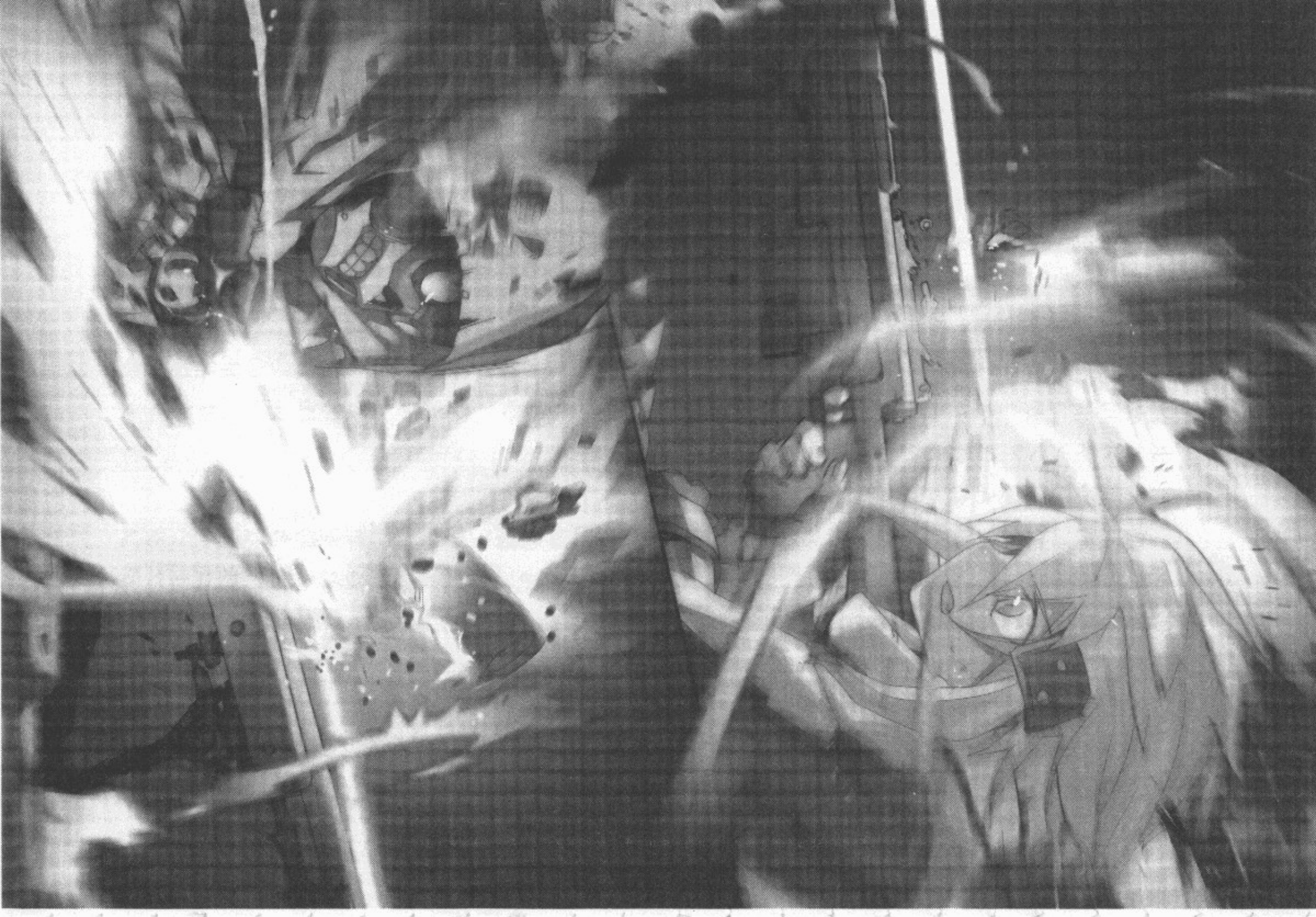
Death Gun, who's being aimed at in the scope, moved his L115 and pointed his gun at Sinon. Poking out from under his black jaw were the bloody red eyes that were coldly staring at Sinon's forehead. Sinon immediately squeezed the trigger without even waiting for the reticule to shrink.

As her beloved gun let out a huge bang, Death Gun's sniper rifle let out a little fire. Sinon moved her face away from the scope to watch her bullet that was flying over and the enemy's bullet that was flying over through her naked eye. The trajectories of both bullets had looked like the same.

For a moment, Sinon had the feeling that the bullets would hit each other. However, such a miracle never happened. At last two bullets seemed to graze by each other by the tiniest of gaps as they went slightly off course.

KUWANG! A sharp impact sound rang beside the eye piece. Then, the large scope that was installed on the Hecate vanished without a trace. She would be immediately dead if her right eye was still there. Death Gun's .338 Lapua bullet grazed past Sinon's right shoulder and disappeared behind.

And the Hecate's .50BMG bullet missed its target silently and hit the L115 gun directly.



The guns in GGO would have a fixed durability for each part. Normally, only the gun itself would be worn out, and this could be recovered through maintenance. No matter which part was hit, it would be a lot of damage, but even so, it's hard to make the durability drop to zero. Also, it could be repaired if there were some durability points left—but it's a different case altogether if the weak parts of the gun got shot by a large caliber. Like now.

A small fireball was formed at Death Gun's chest. The center of the L115 scattered into shrapnel and immediately disappeared. Also, parts like the gun stock, scope and barrel fell onto the sand. These parts could be used, but the mechanism part couldn't be used again. In other words, the «Silent Assassin» was dead at this moment.

…Sorry.

Sinon said this apology secretly in her mind, but the target to her apology was obviously not Death Gun, but that gun with such rare and great performance ability. She again pulled the bolt of the gun. Even though the safe sound of the metal was heard as the bullet was loaded into the chamber, the scope was destroyed, and she couldn't use it to snipe from afar.

"I'll leave the rest to you then, Kirito."

She muttered at the lightsaber warrior's profile that was running.

Kirito and Death Gun were about 200m apart. Even if he activates Optical Camouflage, he couldn't get away from the situation as there would be clear footprints left on the sand.

The mantle guy slowly got up from under the cactus, probably giving up. The large barrel that was left of the L115 was slinging down from his right hand, and he slowly moved forward like he was gliding. Was he going to use that metal rod to fight? That lightsaber of Kirito that could slice even the Hecate's bullet could slice it in half in one hit.

Both of them were quickly closing in. Even without a scope, Sinon who had the long-sight skill could clearly see Kirito running forward while raising a large amount of sand and Death Gun who was slowly dragging his feet forward.

Kirito continued to run as he swiftly raised the lightsaber in his right hand over his shoulder. He then thrust his left hand forward at the same time. It

was the posture for that overwhelmingly intense thrusting technique seen countless times in the preliminaries.

In contrast, Death Gun moved the gun barrel that was giving a black glow over to the left hand and grabbed the front end of the gun with his right hand. Both of them were about 5 seconds away from each other. There were camera glows appearing behind both of them. Right now, the audience was watching this live telecast from the bars inside GGO or from the multi-MMO channels on the outside, and of course, they wouldn't know about Death Gun's crimes and Kirito's aim. But they would still watch the screen for this intense battle scenario. Sinon forgot all about this and merely widened her eyes to watch this deathmatch.

Death Gun then raised the gun barrel horizontally with both hands.

As his hand let out a sharp light—

"Ahh…!"

Sinon left out a sharp cry.

Death Gun moved both hands away. The gun barrel left his left hand and flew backwards.

And on his right hand—there was a thin metal rod that was drawn from below the gun. It was the cleaning rod. Was that his final weapon? The cleaning rod should only be a tool to maintain the gun. It wouldn't have any attack power, and even if he used it to beat someone, the most it would do would be to reduce a little of the enemy's HP…

—No.

That wasn't a rod used to clean a gun. The tip that should have an opening was as sharp as a needle. Was that a sword? But even its base was about 1mm thick. Could that thing really hurt someone? Speaking of which, there shouldn't be any other metallic swords in GGO other than combat knifes.

Flabbergasted, Sinon saw that Kirito's back seem to freeze.

However, the lightsaber warrior didn't stop. The energy saber that's shining in his right hand thrust forward. The jet engine-like sound effect of metal even reached Sinon's ears while she was on the hill. The sharp end that had a sure-kill ability was sucked in by the mantle. Kirito wanted to use this entire sword to stab into his body—but failed as Death Gun's upper body

bent backwards. This perfect dodge looked like he knew Kirito's move and timing.

The power of Kirito's one-handed thrust merely left a burnt smell in the air and went by Death Gun.

Perhaps because the move was dodged, the lightsaber warrior froze and showed a short opening. Though he immediately moved and got ready to jump forward and right, Death Gun, who was still bending backwards, moved his right hand like some independent creature. That approximately 80cm long metal needle tip—

Stabbed straight into the left shoulder of the black uniform viciously.

"…KIRITO!"

As Sinon shouted out, the bloody red special effect scattered in the darkness like real blood.

Yuuki Asuna placed her handphone on the sensor. Once the sound effect of the transaction went through a second later, she then said, 'thank you!' and ran out of the taxi.

At the front of the rotary, there was a large entrance that was partially lit even though it was almost 10pm. Even though the power of the automatic doors were cut off, Asuna ran to the sign that indicates that it was the night entrance without thinking.

She pushed the door and went through the cold air that smelt of disinfectant to the visitor's counter. As Kikuoka Seijirou had contacted the hospital before, Asuna immediately said what she was ready to say to the nurse who looked up.

"I'm Yuuki who just called to visit room 7025!"

At the same time, she pulled her student ID out from her pocket and handed it to the counter. As the nurse took the identification card to compare with Asuna's face, Asuna herself used that time to memorize the floor plan that's on the wall opposite her.

"Hello, Yuuki Asuna-san. This is your visitor pass. Please remember to return this pass when you leave. The patient's room is from the elevator on the right…"

"I got it. Thank you!"

She hurriedly bowed once she got the pass card and left the shocked nurse behind her. She ran to the elevator. In the hospital records, Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto wasn't here to be treated or hospitalized, but to be checked on, thus Asuna's anxiety was a little unnatural. However, there's no time to look at others now.

There seemed to be some gate that looked like a platform entrance in front of the elevator. Asuna placed her pass card on the screen, let it scan through and went through before the metal doors opened completely. She pressed the up button, ran into the elevator doors that opened and finally heaved a sigh of relief.

—Kazuto must have felt this way when he had to run to me after releasing me from the bird cage in ALO, right? He's definitely alright. He couldn't be... Though she believed that, she couldn't hold back that anxious feeling.

Every time the elevator passed through a level, there would be a steady electronic sound. It was only the 7th level, but the speed at which it went up felt really slow.

"Don't worry, mama."

Suddenly, an immature voice came through the handphone receiver that she's holding with both hands.

That's the «daughter» of Kazuto and Asuna, the AI Yui. Her main processor was now in the terminal-type platform in Kazuto's room. If there was a need, she would enter the game as a guide pixie in ALO, and they could talk through the phone in real life. Even though the battery was limited which made her unable to keep talking for long, they had been in constant contact ever since Asuna left the Dicey Café.

"Papa won't lose to any strong opponent. Because he's papa."

"…Yes. That's right."

Asuna placed the microphone near her lips and softly responded. The stiff fingers could finally move at this moment, but the tension was still in her heart.

Kirito was requested by Kikuoka to head into GGO to investigate that mysterious player «Death Gun». In the end, the one controlling this avatar

was an ex-member of the SAO red guild «Laughing Coffin». Also—those two that Death Gun shot in the game died of heart failure in the real world.

Without doubt, something strange must have happened. Though Kikuoka was certain that Kirito wouldn't have any danger while diving, he could tell that those two strange deaths weren't just a coincidence.

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With that sound, the elevator went through the 6th level and started to slow down before stopping on the 7th level with an electronic sound. At the same time the elevator opened, Yui immediately gave the directions 'head right for 15m, turn left and walk for another 8m'. Asuna immediately followed what she said and ran all the way down the empty corridor.

There were sets of electronic doors on both sides of the corridor, and Asuna checked the metal doorplates with her eyes as she ran. 7023…24..25! She placed her access pass on the door, and the door immediately opened after the light on it turned from red to blue.

This was a single room ward that had grey and white base colors. Near the center of the room was a plastic patient's bed Asuna herself relied on before. The curtains on all sides of the room were opened, and there was a professional looking monitor. The cables that were attached to the monitor split up and were attached on the exposed chest of the boy who's lying on the bed. The boy's head was also wearing the rather familiar silver circlet Asuna was familiar with—the AmuSphere.

—Kirito-kun!

Asuna forcefully gasped as she let out some warm air and was ready to shout—

"…Kirigaya-kun!?"

A certain voice rang before Asuna's did, causing her to almost tumble forward in surprise. She turned her neck to the right and found that the monitor was blocking a foldable chair beside the bed, and there was also a person sitting on it.

That person was wearing a white uniform, wearing a nurse's hat and her hair tied into braids. Her face also had a rather trendy looking pair of glasses. She was a nurse. Thinking about it, Kikuoka did say that someone was by Kazuto's side.

However, that person was actually a beauty of an unknown age, and she even bent forward and almost got onto the half-naked Kazuto. Asuna felt somewhat unhappy on seeing that, but the thought merely flashed through. The nurse who noticed Asuna walking into the room lifted her head and looked somewhat nervous.

"Ah, are you Yuuki-san? I heard that you're coming. Please come here."

The nurse said with a somewhat hoarse voice and then used her left hand to point beside the bed. Asuna ran over without her telling, nodded back and again looked at Kazuto's face.

Of course, Kazuto's eyes were closed. However, he wasn't sleeping and neither was he conscious. The AmuSphere isolated his 5 senses from reality and took him away to a distant unique land. As the AmuSphere would receive all the muscle movement from the brain, his face and body wouldn't be moving. Logically, that should be the case, but on seeing Kazuto's face, Asuna immediately felt that his heart was rather unstable.

"How's Ki…Kazuto-kun?"

Asuna lifted her head up and asked the nurse. On hearing this, the nurse with the «Aki» nametag frowned and shook her head.

"Don't worry, he's not in physical danger. But the heart rate just jumped to 130 beats a minute just now…"

"Heart rate…"

Asuna muttered and looked at the screen beside her. The liquid crystal display showed the wave patterns and the words [132 bpm]. The wave pattern in front of her was moving erratically.

It's not rare for the heartbeat rate to increase while playing a VRMMO. While diving into the environment and fighting against monsters, many would be nervous and so their pulse would quicken. Or rather, this would be how they enjoy the game.

However—Kazuto was that Kirito. In the floating city of Aincrad, he was a solo player on the clearing team and would be the one who would brush close to death most often. How could he be so nervous in an ordinary game?

In fact, she had never seen Kirito look so frantic during the past year when they were playing ALO together.

—What in the world happened?

Asuna used her finger to rub away the sweat that appeared on Kazuto's forehead and bit her lips tightly.

At this moment, Yui's voice came from the handphone in her left hand.

"Mama, please watch the panel PC on the wall! I'll connect it to the network channel «MMO Stream» live feed!"

On hearing this, Asuna looked up and found that there was a 40-inch monitor that's on the wall near the edge of the bed. Yui may be using the handphone wireless function to connect to that computer as the originally offed-screen lit on its own and the browser went into full screen mode.

The image that appeared was exactly the same as how it was seen from the room in ALO.

At the top left hand corner, the large words Gun Gale Online were written there. On the side, there were the long and small words 'the 3rd Bullet of Bullet battle royale finals is being telecasted!'

On the right side of the screen were the namelist of the players. The one that took the largest space of the screen was the split channels that had multiple split camera images. But now, only two large windows were lined together.

The background of those two was the desert under the blueish-white moon. It seemed that two players were engaged in close ranged combat and the cameras were filming them from behind. The window on the left depicted a petite avatar with fully black uniform and flowing hair. He was holding a purple-blue lightsaber that was glowing, and his left hand was just hanging down. Also, they could see fresh red blood scattering from his left shoulder. The footer beside the avatar had the words that showed his name, [Kirito].

"That's Kirito-kun…"

The impression the avatar gave was different from the «black swordsman» during SAO and the Spriggan in ALO as that slender back looked no different from a girl. However, the way he raised the sword and adjusted his center of gravity was showing that he was Kirito.

Watching the same visual from the other side of the bed, nurse Aki said in a troubled voice,

"Is that Kirigaya-kun's avatar over there? So Kirigaya-kun who's unconscious is controlling it now, right?"

"Yes. He's fighting now…so the heart rate increased."

Though Asuna answered this, there was something she couldn't seem to explain clearly to nurse Aki. Kirito's left shoulder had a severe wound—and his opponent was most likely another survivor of SAO and could have killed two players in GGO.

Asuna timidly turned to look at the right window.

Standing over there with his back facing the screen was that player who was wearing a mantle, which was what she expected. His back looked lifeless and full of holes, but Asuna knew that those who were completely used to the virtual world would have this posture. She held her breath and watched the small sharp object in the mantle guy's right hand.

"Eh…"

On first glance, she couldn't help but cry out.

The mantle guy wasn't holding the large sniper rifle he used on the metal bridge or the black handgun, but an ordinary thin and long metal rod—

No. it wasn't just an ordinary metal rod. It started to thin from the base on, and was already as thick as a needle at the end. That was a sword. On first glance, it looked rather similar to the rapier Asuna was used to wielding, but in fact, it was a weapon that didn't have a blade, one that could only be used to stab.

"Estoc…? Ah…ahhh…"

Asuna herself didn't even realize that she was making a sound. Her distant memory started to ache like how that sword stabbed through. There was really a cadre amongst «Laughing Coffin» who was skilled in using this weapon. His name—his name was—

Of course, the mantle guy wasn't using the name he used in SAO like Kirito. However, Asuna couldn't help but look over at the avatar's foot.

The displayed player name, was also in alphabets.

[Sterben].

Asuna couldn't read it out exactly immediately and could only say it in an interrupted manner,

"St…ster…ben? Was it a misspell of Steven…?"

"No…that's not it, mama."

As Yui answered this, nurse Aki added ' it isn't like that'. Asuna looked at her, and the nurse frowned her bewitching eyebrows before saying in an extremely tense expression,

"This is a German medical term. It's read as…«Sterben»."

"Ster…ben."

Asuna had never heard of this word before. Nurse Aki looked at her troubled expression, hesitated for a little bit and then said with a somewhat hoarse voice,

"It means…«death». It's a common term in a hospital…when a patient just passes away…"

The hairs on Asuna's arms and back immediately stood up. She then finally turned her eyes away from the screen to the face of the boy lying beside her.

"Kirito…kun."

At this moment, Asuna's voice was trembling so much that she couldn't even recognize it.

GGO was a game operation that was created from the completely free VRMMO support package «The Seed».

The Seed was a very versatile system, but even the operator couldn't change its processing. In other words, it was a black box existence. Games operating after 3 months since the start would definitely be able to «convert» characters from all games with the On setting, and the «pain absorber» that could prevent giving players virtual pain or use misleads to erase the pain could only be adjusted, and couldn't be turned off completely.

In other words, no matter how many times someone got shot in GGO—even if a hand or leg got blown away, the player wouldn't even feel overwhelming pain or numbness.

Thus, the pain that's on my left shoulder and the ice-pick like pain was just an imagination. No, the pain numbness mechanism had already removed this imagination, so this isn't real pain. It's just my memory, an awakening of a memory in another world, where I got stabbed by the same weapon in the same part.

About 5m away from me, the mantle guy—«Death Gun» was showing the sharp tip of the Estoc that was giving off a black glow and swaying like it was some rhythm. That guy could launch stabs without any preparatory movements in such a situation. It would be hard to dodge it if I view it as an ordinary sword.

That's right. I once had the same thought when I was in the cave «Laughing Coffin» was in. Back then, I felt that the weapon this guy used was rather rare, but in that intense battle, I really never had the chance to talk to him.

About a year and a half later on, I finally could say to him what I couldn't say back then.

"…That's really a rare weapon. Or should I say…I didn't know that GGO allows for metal swords."

Then, Death Gun let out a hoarse laugh from the hood that was covering the head, and then said in an interrupted manner,

"To think, that you became so lazy, «Black Swordsman». A high level, «knife creation» skill and a «weapons creation» skill would be enough. The length and weight, mostly like that, that's the limit."

"…Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like I could create the sword I liked."

Once I finished answering, the enemy again laughed,

"Like back then, you still want a high STR rated sword, right? That toy, in your hand, shouldn't be rather useful."

The lightsaber «Shadow Light» in my right hand let out a low moan, and couldn't possibly like being called a toy. The moment that was said, it then let out a little burst of spark. I shrugged and said for my sword,

"It's not some toy. I already thought of using this kind of weapon once. Also…"

I swung the lightsaber, letting it give a vibrating sound and then put the sword that was down below to the middle.

"A sword's a sword. It's enough if I can hack your HP to zero."

"Ku, ku, ku, how awesome, huh? However, if you can."

The red eyes that were deep inside the hood were flickering irregularly. The skull-faced metal mask seemed to laugh coldly.

"«Black swordsman», you've, breathed in, too much, of the, corroded, air of, the real world, that move just now, the slow, «Vorpal strike», just now, you would be disappointed, if the old you, saw that."

"…Maybe, but you should be the same too, right? Or rather, do you still think that you're still a member of «Laughing Coffin»?"

"Oh? So have you, remembered, so many things?"

Death Gun let out the sound of breathing as the metal rubbed against each other and moved his hands as if he was clapping. The rotten bandage that covered his right hand vaguely showed the tattoo of «Laughing Coffin» on the inside of the wrist.

"…Then you, should, be clear, about the, difference, between, me, and you. I'm, a real, red player, but you're not. You killed, merely because, you, were driven, by fear, to survive. A coward, you are, without thinking, about, the meaning, to be, a killer, just wanting, to forget, about everything."

"…!"

I was immediately rendered speechless by what he said.

—Why? Why was he able to accurately say out my mental state? I had never interacted with this guy ever since the Laughing Coffin crusade until when we met again in the waiting dome.

—Don't tell me…this guy really has some supernatural power? I thought that I saw through his killing methods. Am I thinking too highly of myself…?

I motivated myself and recovered my sight that was starting to distort. I could still maintain the tip of the lightsaber and prevent it from trembling, which itself can be said to be a miracle. If he sees that there's an opening,

Death Gun's sudden stab that doesn't have any preparatory movement will definitely stab through my chest.

I took a slight breath through my gritted teeth and then answered him softly,

"…Maybe. But you're not a red player anymore. I know how you killed «Zekushiido», «Usujio Tarako», «Pale Rider» and another player that could have died in your hands. That's not the power of the black handgun, and neither was it your own ability."

"Oh? Then, say it, out then."

Now's the crucial moment to decide the winner.

I exerted all my strength into my eyes and stared tightly at the enemy—and then said out what I believed was the truth.

"…You used that metamaterial optical camouflage to read the addresses of all the BoB players from the monitor at the presidential building. You then got your accomplices to enter their rooms and get them to inject drugs while you shoot, making them look like they died of heart failure. That's the true identity of Death Gun."

This time, Death Gun finally went silent.

Those red eyes in the darkness that laid in the midst of the hood suddenly narrowed. I couldn't really decide if my guess was correct from his response. I took the great killing intent he gave off and then continued,

"You may not know that, but the Ministry of Internal Affairs have the players' names in SAO. Once they know your ex-character name, they can track your real name, your address and your modus operandi. Stop making anymore mistakes. Log out and hurry to the nearest police station to surrender."

Even so—he remained silent.

Under the dry night wind, the surface of the mantle guy looked like some little organisms gathering as they continued to move. The live camera feed that was flickering with the REC sign seemed to be impatient as it increased its height. Death Gun and I had been facing each other for about 3 minutes. As the audience couldn't hear our conversation, their expectations and tension should be at the climax. But right now, we're only

clashing with our tongues. Once Death Gun confirmed my guess, there wouldn't be any meaning to continue the battle.

However—

Several seconds later, 'kukuku', what came from under the hood was a chilly laughter that wasn't any different from before.

"I see…so your imagination, is really interesting. However, that's too bad, «Black Swordsman». You can't, stop me. Because, you definitely, can't, remember, my name!"

"Wha…what, why are you so confident now?"

"Ku, ku, you may, even forget, about the reason you forgot. Listen up…after that battle, just when we're about to be sent to jail, I was about to tell you my name, but you said 'I don't want to know your name. There's no need because I don't want to meet you again'."

I was immediately unable to say anything and could only widen my eyes. And Death Gun merely murmured as if he was mocking me.

"You don't know, my name. So, you can't remember. You, can't do anything. You can only wait here, until you're taken down by me, lying there awkwardly—and then, merely watch me, kill that girl…"

A certain object glided past the air and let out ripping sound, and then, a flash of silver cut past the darkness.

"You can't, do anything!"

Death Gun's right hand stabbed at me like a puppeteer.

I subconsciously used my lightsaber to block the stab that was aimed at my heart.

The energy blade let out a buzzing sound before entering the line of the Estoc. The blueish white plasma blade slashed directly into the metal side.

Logically, any metal sword would be sliced. The Shadow Light could even slice Sinon's sniper bullet in half, so how could this thin metal rod block it? I immediately raised the saber up and got ready to slice it at the left shoulder of Death Gun—

In the end, an irritating sound rang inside my avatar.

I could only blankly widen my eyes and see that the metal rod that was glowing was stabbed straight inside me.

Only a part of Death Gun's Estoc was burned, and there was no other damage. It could actually block the energy blade that had overwhelming power. Why—why is there such a thing?

Death Gun continued to step forward and stabbed the Estoc in deeper. My HP got reduced drastically with the movement of the metal. At this moment, I could only grit my teeth and use all the strength in my right foot to jump backwards. The enemy's blade got away from me, and the special effect of the damage drew a red line.

I jumped back for about 2, 3 steps and again pulled my distance away from Death Gun. In the end, he moved his mouth like he wanted to lick the blade.

"…Ku, ku. This guy's, material, is the, highest grade, metal, that could be, obtained, in, this game. I heard, that, it's a galactic, warship, armor plate. Ku ku, ku…"

Then, Death Gun didn't seem like he wanted to speak up as he flipped the mantle and attacked me. His right hand went at an invisible speed as he drew numerous afterimages in the sky. He had never used this continuous stabbing attack up till now. This thrust is a high-level sword skill «Star Splash», an 8-straight thrust attack—

The lightsaber in my hand couldn't block the attack, and I couldn't dodge it at will as it was sand below me. The sharp needle then continued to stab into my body.

—Kirito!

Sinon tried her best to suppress the shout that was about to come out of her throat and the impulse to squeeze the finger at the trigger.

On the battlefield that's about 700m away, the special effects showed damage that came from the black-clothed swordsman. Even though Sinon didn't touch any weapon other than a gun, but even she could tell how skilled Death Gun's sword techniques were when he was able to injure Kirito. She held her breath, thinking whether the attack just now would have worn out his HP. Luckily, Kirito himself didn't have the DEAD tag on

him. He kicked hard on the sand, did a backflip and used that to gain a rather large distance from Death Gun.

However, Death Gun himself didn't seem to want to let Kirito have a chance to regroup himself. He flipped his hood and closed the distance between the two of them like a phantom. The automatic-control cameras continued to increase in numbers like they knew that a winner was about to be decided. Soon, about 10 cameras surrounded them and caused the corner in the desert to look like an arena.

If the Hecate's scope was still there, she could have sniped to cover Kirito, but in this distance, even Sinon couldn't easily use her naked eye to shrink the reticule. She could even mishit Kirito accidentally if she attacked randomly.

—Hang in there. Do your best, Kirito!

Sinon forgot that she was also in danger in the real world as she was in a high-kneel position on the rocky hill, clenching her fists as she prayed this.

Kirito once killed a few players to protect himself and a few others in the infamous death game «Sword Art Online». This experience could be said to be rather similar to the burden Shino bore. Thus, his troubles should be similar to Shino to a certain extent.

Kirito said that he couldn't overcome these painful memories and sealed them in a corner of his mind, before saying that he could only face them from that day onwards.

He was following what he just said as he got ready to personally stop the criminal who brought darkness from SAO—Death Gun.

But Kirito could do that not because he was weak. He just told himself to be stronger. No matter how much he felt troubled or anguished, he had to accept his weakness. That's because he was the one who continued to persist on looking forward under such a situation. Strength—wasn't about the outcome, but about the process of moving towards a certain goal.

—I want to talk to you. To tell you what I felt and what I discovered.

—Is there anything I could help with? If I go close to them, it would be the opposite effect. Once I'm aimed at by the Blackstar, Kirito will be unable to do anything. Even so, I'm just trying my luck if I snipe without a scope. The

range of the support weapon MP7 isn't completely enough. Is there…there any way I could help…

"…!"

Momentairly, Sinon's whole body shook.

There was. In this situation, there was a way for her to take the initiative and «attack». She didn't know how effective it would be—but there's a value in trying.

Sinon took a deep breath, gritted her teeth hard and looked at the battle that's far away.

—Kirito-kun!!

Asuna covered her mouth just when she was about to scream out.

There wasn't any lighting special effects, but the move Death Gun used was undoubtedly the 8-strike thrust «Star Splash». That was a high-level skill like Asuna the «Flash» was skilled with in the past. Basically, this was a sword technique of a «Rapier», but as it didn't include any hacking or slashing, it could also be done with the «Estoc» that was derived from the Rapier.

The flat screen on the wall showed Kirito continued to be thrusted all over his body with the continuous stab attacks as he jumped back to pull his distance. However, on the right side of the screen, the mantle guy moved in a mysterious gliding like action and pursued him. Kirito continued to struggle with the Estoc that was surrounding him.

The monitoring device beside Asuna started to let out an urgent electronic sound, causing her to glance aside. Kazuto's heart rate had already risen to 160 bpm. Asuna forced herself to look away from the screen and looked at the face of Kazuto who was lying on the bed.

He was sweating a lot, and he looked to be in pain. The mouth that was slightly opened was gasping. Nurse Aki noticed him to be like this, and the eyes behind the spectacles showed a worried expression.

"…I told him to take lots of water before he dived in…but it's now more than 4 hours. There will be danger of dehydration if this continued. Can't we log him out first…?"

On hearing the nurse's words, Asuna could only bite her lips tightly and said,

"Kirito-kun can't hear anything we say here…and he's taking part in a PvP tournament. I don't know how effective the log out system would be…"

In ALO, to prevent the players from deliberately «disconnecting » when they were in a bad situation— if this situation happened in a VRMMO tournament, the grounds will be switched—and they will be prevented from logging out for a while.

"…But the AmuSphere will note the blood flow in the brain. If it ends up damaging the body, it should be automatically logged out…"

Once Asuna said that, the nurse nodded her head and said that,

"I know. We'll just observe for a while. He's not a patient, so I don't think there's a need to inject fluids into him."

"You're right…"

Asuna's voice became stiff. Wouldn't it be like the time during SAO if he had to go on a drip.

No—there's something completely different from that. The thing was that Kazuto wasn't wearing the Nerve Gear that had a death trap in it, but the AmuSphere with a safety configuration. Thus, even if Asuna forcefully removed the silver circlet on Kazuto's head, there shouldn't be any danger posed to him. Kirito would only disappear from the desert that's being telecasted on the wall and return back to the bed—in other words, return to Asuna's side.

That terrifying enemy called «Sterben» shall never touch Kazuto again.

Asuna tried her best to hold back this urge.

Kirito/Kazuto was now betting his pride as a swordsman to fight hard, and Asuna obviously couldn't stop him.

But, was—wasn't there anything she could do? She's right beside him, but was there no way she could pass any message to him who's fighting in the other world?

"Mama, your hand…"

Suddenly, a soft voice came from the handphone. It was Yui's.

"Please hold onto papa's hand. The AmuSphere can't stop senses from the outside world like Nerve Gear. Papa should be able to feel mama's warmth. I can't touch physical objects…but please bring…mine too…"

Yui's voice was trembling by the time she spoke till the end. Asuna herself was shaken up hard inside as she forcefully shook her head and answered,

"No…papa will definitely feel Yui's hands. Let's cheer for papa…cheer for Kirito-kun!"

As she said that, she placed her handphone into Kazuto's limp left hand and used both her hands to cup it.

The patient's room was a little warm, but Kazuto's hand was as cold as an ice block. The automatic log-out function may happen if she held it too hard, so Asuna grasped Kazuto with her hands lightly, exerting all her warmth and will, hoping to make his hand go warm.

Asuna wasn't looking at the live telecast anymore as she merely closed her eyes and continued to pray.

—Do your best, Kirito-kun. For all that you believe in. I shall be by your side always. Always protecting you from behind, supporting you.

Kazuto's icy cold left hand jerked slightly, but definitely.

The enemy was really strong.

Whether it's in terms of speed, balance or striking moment, they were all flawless. There were few swordsmen who were so skilled on the clearing team.

But why did it become like this? This cadre of «Laughing Coffin» who's controlling the character «Death Gun» couldn't see my swords during the crusade. I spent quick work and reduced his HP to half, causing him to retreat to the back lines.

Looking at things, I guess the half year where he was imprisoned in Black Iron prison caused this guy to change drastically. The one who thoroughly crushed Laughing Coffin was one of the members on the clearing team, me—and he used revenge against us as motivation to work hard on his swordsmanship. Even if he couldn't gain money and experience, repeated

training of sword skills could allow him to improve. This guy may have trained on the same movements hundreds or thousands of times in the dark and cold prison. The sword technique that an Estoc could use was firmly ingrained into this guy's senses.

I may not lose to him in terms of the number of times I swung the sword, but the sword in my hand was the lightsaber that's a lot lighter than my old swords, and the touch feels completely different from before. It's easy to use the one-strike «Vorpal Strike», but it'll be difficult to use continuous moves. Also, Death Gun probably won't allow any openings for me to use some huge attack. He continued to remain close and kept using all sorts of varying thrust attacks. I tried my best to dodge them, but the sharp tip of the Estoc still pierced through parts of my body from time to time and slowly drained my HP. I think I have only about 30% left.

Even as my HP's being worn down by that sharp sword, Death Gun can't really kill me if he used that black handgun to shoot me. I didn't input my name and address at the machine in the presidential estate, so nobody could find my residence.

Was I too reliant—in a «safe feeling»? My eyes were completely covered by the power of the black handgun, which caused me to not look at the user's true ability. If that's the case, it's obvious that I would be in such a tight spot. The enemy was still in that death game, and I left that place a long time ago, whether it was my body or my heart.

Maybe it was too late that I noticed it.

However, I still wouldn't allow myself to lose to him like that. My body in the real world shouldn't have any damage, but like what that guy just said, Sinon, who's waiting on the rocky hill behind me was already in the range of that black gun. If I get taken down now, Death Gun will attack Sinon. Once she's hit in battle by a bullet from that black handgun, Death Gun's accomplice will kill Sinon in the real world.

One moment. Just one moment.

I just need him to stop this one series of attacks for the time being.

If it's the power of the weapon, the lightsaber far exceeds that of the extremely thin Estoc. Once I can accurately hit him in one hit, I believe I can wear Death Gun's HP down to zero. However, I just couldn't create this opening. The half-hearted attempts will definitely not work, the enemy's Estoc could even break through the energy blade of the

lightsaber, which means I couldn't create an opening by swinging hard in a sword duel. What should I do? What should I do—

Kyu kyu kyu. With those deep sounds, the last strike of three consecutive hits grazed my face on the right, and my HP finally went red.

The special effect that flowed out of my face dyed my vision red.

Maybe he thought that he was winning as Death Gun's red eyes were glowing even redder.

The Estoc user of the red—what was originally «Laughing Coffin» chose red eyes too. My consciousness shook, and cracks appeared in the thick walls of my memory.

That's right…I did refuse to know this guy's name. I didn't want to get involved with this again. I just wanted to hurry up and forget that night that was full of madness, blood, screams and curses.

But I couldn't do that.

I didn't forget anything at all. I just pretended to forget, just lied to myself. I merely sealed that part of my memory away, trying to convince my brain that I didn't see the fact that was there…

Death Gun dragged his Estoc back to deal me the final blow. The cold glow that remained on its tip caused that sealed fragment of my memory to appear.

Before we went on the crusade, we were gathered at the headquarters of the «Holy Dragon Alliance» guild for our last meeting.

During the meeting, we again explained the member information regarding the members of «Laughing Coffin». That included the battle abilities of their leader «PoH» and his cadres' weapons, skills, appearances—and names.

Of course, we did mention that two of them liked to use their colors. One of them was black, the guy who liked to use a poisoned dagger. His name was…yes, «Johnny Black». Klein immediately gave a serious look after hearing it, and specially told me 'don't fight with this guy. Or else we won't know who to protect'.

The other person was red. However, he wasn't dressed completely in red. This Estoc user merely had his eyes and hair red, and had a reverse cross

sign dyed on his grey helmet. His colors and the picture used looked like the «Knights of the Blood» , and caused the sub-leader of the KoB, Asuna the «Flash» to give an irritated look. I faced this guy right from the start. As he got ready to retreat, he left these words 'I'll, definitely, kill you later', and intended to report his name. It was this guy.

One and a half years later, this guy broke the wall of the other world and appeared in front of me. Like what he declared before, this mantle guy got ready to stab through me with the Estoc—«Death Gun» was that guy. His name was—

"«XaXa»."

The word that came from my mouth caused the metal that was about to pierce through my heart to deviate course.

I ignored the slightly stabbed feeling of the sword tip that was about to be pulled back and continued,

"«Red-eyed XaXa». That's your name."

Next—a few things happened in front of my eyes.

A red line suddenly went into the center of Death Gun's hood from behind me.

That wasn't a bullet—just a simple bullet line. It was Sinon. I immediately understood her intention. This was an attack of hers that used the bullet line. It was the final hit that was based on her experience, inspiration and will to fight. The phantom bullet that she fired.

Death Gun seemed like a beast who felt a powerful carnivore's killing intent and instinctively jumped back.

A low growl came from below the skull-head mask. He should have realize that Sinon couldn't possibly risk shooting at me in case of a mishit, but he wavered after I called his name, causing his judgment to be slowed. Thus, he dodged automatically as if he reacted to a phantom bullet.

This was the last chance. The bullet line won't work anymore. I can't waste this chance Sinon gave me. I stepped in front and raced after Death Gun.

Ah—damn it. His profile disappeared. It was the «Optical Camouflage». I could still find him based on the footprints he left on the ground, but now

the lightsaber couldn't deal a fatal blow to him. If I can't kill him in one hit, my HP will become zero once I'm countered.

At this moment, there was something more shocking that happened.

My left hand started moving as if it was guided by someone. The icy hand that was tense due to nervousness—was surrounded by a certain familiar pair of warm hands that guided me. My left hand immediately moved and then gripped onto something—the second weapon that even I forgot about, the «FiveSeven handgun». As my hand felt the weight that was pulled out of my gun pouch, a certain circuit in my consciousness suddenly flared.

"U…OOOOOHHH—!!"

I roared and stepped forward. I then spun my left side back forward like a bullet.

Death Gun's profile was about to vanish, and I swayed my profile before swinging my left hand.

A two-handed sword skill would normally have the sword in the left hand swing up from near the ground to break the enemy's defenses. However, what's in my hand wasn't a sword but a handgun. However, who said that I couldn't use sword techniques with a gun? I used the impression I had of swinging the left sword up and continued to squeeze the trigger.

The bullet that was flying up continued to hit the object that was about to become invisible and shone sparks intensely in the air. Death Gun's body finally appeared in the midst of the flash. I faced the avatar whose Optical Camouflage was being destroyed—

And swung the lightsaber in my right hand in a clockwise direction with motion and weight.

This was the «Double Circular» twin-swords assault skill.

The energy blade sliced deep into Death Gun's right shoulder and then sliced in diagonally before leaving from his left abdomen. At this moment, the «black handgun» that was in his gun pouch was sliced in half by the lightsaber, and after giving off a bright orange flash, it exploded.

The avatar that was sliced in half, the ripped mantle and the flame arc floated under the blueish-white sky.

After a long flight—

Dodou, two consecutive deep sounds rang, and Death Gun's upper and lower bodies landed somewhere away from each other. After a while, the metal needle-like thing—the Estoc was stabbed onto the ground between both parts of the body.

At this moment, while I was kneeling on the ground on one leg, I heard a weak voice,

"…It's not, over…that person…won't let…you…end this…"

However, the [DEAD] tag that appeared between the sliced body caused this player Death Gun to stop completely and unable to say anything. I slowly got up, lowered my head and watched the «corpse» on the ground.

Having lost the mantle that would have represented himself, there was nothing that represented Death Gun except for that skull mask. I looked at the goggles that had lost their glow and silently answered,

"No…it's over, XaXa. Your accomplices will be found. The killing acts of «Laughing Coffin» have come to an end."

I then turned around and dragged my battered body west.

After walking for about a few hundred steps, hundreds of meters away, my lowered sight finally saw a pair of small feet wearing small boots, and I looked up.

The sniper girl was standing there. She was holding that large sniper rifle that lost its scope, giving a steady smile.

Sinon looked like she had something to say as she opened her mouth, but for an instant, she didn't know what to say.

Even she didn't know what sort of emotion she had in her heart now. There was merely a rising burning feeling up her chest that caused her to hug the Hecate in her arms tightly.

Seeing Sinon standing blankly down there, Kirito showed a calm smile for the first time. He placed the FiveSeven handgun in his hand back into the holster and clenched his fist before reaching it out to Sinon.

And Sinon raised her right fist to tap his fist lightly.

"…It's over."

The lightsaber warrior muttered simply and then looked up. Sinon then followed him and looked up as well.

The clouds have parted unknowingly, and the stars in the sky were showing their shine. Sinon then remembered that this was the first time she saw stars in this world.

The skies in GGO were often covered by thick clouds because of past wars. The daytime here were always of depressing sunset colors, and even the night would have bloodstained-like red.

But as prophesized by the NPC elder on the streets, once the toxic on the land is purified and returned back to white sand, the clouds shall disappear, and the shine of the stars and the spaceships would return to the sky. Of course, no people would believe such ordinary words, but maybe this desert wasn't just a wilderness for players to wander in, but may even be a sacred land far away in the distant future.

Sinon immediately couldn't say anything as she looked up at the sparkling group of lights in the clear night sky, and the remaining lights of the spaceships that looked like rivers.

Soon after, Kirito said,

"…It's about time to end this tournament. The audience may be sick of waiting."

"…Yeah, that's right."

The blue camera feeds that covered the entire sky were flickering with the REC logos anxiously. Kirito may have noticed it as he immediately gave a wry smile. However, he immediately regained his original look, went closer and whispered,

"…The danger of this tournament's finally over. Death Gun was taken down, so the accomplice who's preparing to kill you should have left. Their aim should be to create the rumor that «those players who were shot by that black handgun in GGO will die in the real world», so they probably won't kill people at random. Logically, you shouldn't be in any danger when you log out…but you better call the police for safety reasons."

"…How do I explain everything to 110[4]? They probably won't believe me if I said that someone plotted to kill inside and outside a VRMMO, right?"

After hearing Sinon's question, Kirito was stumped for a bit. However, he immediately nodded and said,

"You're right…my associate is sort of a civil servant, so we can get him to help…but I can't just ask for your address and name…"

At this moment, the lightsaber warrior hesitated and looked away. Of course, he knew how rude it would be to ask for someone else's real identity in a VRMMO.

However, Sinon thought for a while and then said,

"Alright. Let me tell you."

"Eh…bu, but…"

"I just feel that there's no need to worry about this anymore. Besides… I already took the initiative to tell you my past. I've never done it before…"

After hearing her mutter, Kirito widened his eyes, but immediately nodded his head.

"That's true…speaking of which, I was the same too…"

If they continued to drag on like this, Sinon may end up saying 'never mind' because of her fearful nature. Thus, she slung the Hecate behind her shoulder and immediately stepped forward. She placed her lips near Kirito's ears and said in a voice nobody else could hear,

"My name is—Asada Shino. The address is Tokyo District, Bunkyo, Yushima, Yonchome…"

As she finished saying her apartment's name and room number, Kirito immediately answered softly in surprise,

"Yushima? That's a coincidence…I dived in from Ochinomizu in Chiyoda."

"Eh...ehhh!? Isn't that just nearby?"

Now even Sinon was shocked and nearly squealed out. Ochinomizu and Sinon's apartment were just separated from the Kasuga subway and the Kuramae subway. At this moment, Kirito suddenly widened his eyes, let out an 'um…' before continuing,

"Then I'll just log out and go off to find you…"

"Eh…you…"

Sinon nearly said 'are you willing to come by', but shut up at the last moment, coughed dryly a few times and corrected herself,

"Nah…no need. There's a reliable friend nearby…"

Spiegel, also known as Shinkawa Kyouji, who invited Sinon to this world was the second son of a practitioner. His house was in Hongoume right beside hers. He would come over once she gave him a call. Speaking of which, he may have seen the footage of this tournament from the beginning to the end, so she had to find an excuse as to why she got close with Kirito a few times.

"…And that guy's a doctor's kid, so he can take care of me if there's a need."

To hide any embarrassment and end off, Kirito gave a serious look and answered,

"Oi, it'll be bad if something really happened. But I guess it's alright if you say that…I'll request my associate after I log out to check with the police. No matter how late, it should take 15…no, 10 minutes. The police will be at your house in 10 minutes."

"OK, I got it. It'll be great if we can catch the accomplice…"

"Yeah…"

Seeing the still wary Kirito nod his head, Sinon stared at him.

"Forget about that. Are you one to run away after hearing my personal information?"

"Eh, ah…so, sorry. My name's Kirigaya Kazuto. I dived in from Ochinomizu, but my house's at Kawagoe city."

The lightsaber warrior looked panicked as he hurriedly reported his data. Sinon murmured for a while and then chuckled at this non-urgent situation.

"Kirigaya Kazuto. So that's why you're called Kirito, right? That's a really simple naming."

"Wha…what right do you have to say that to me!?"

Both of them smiled. Kirito again looked at the camera above his head and then changed his tone,

"…We can only log out by putting BoB to an end…how about it, Sinon? Do we fight it out like yesterday?"

After hearing his question, Sinon found that her strong desire to have a rematch with Kirito was forgotten completely. She stared at this pretty face in front of her and then said,

"…Strength's not an outcome…but a process of working hard…"

"Eh? What are you saying?"

"Un, it's nothing—I say, you're completely wounded all over now, right? There's nothing to be proud about winning against you. Let's just leave this for the next BoB tournament."

The moment Sinon finished, Kirito raised his eyebrows in shock, but immediately gave a wry smile.

"Are you saying that I can't convert back to my old game before the 4th tournament?"

"You can convert back and then convert here again, but don't think that you can beat me the next time…then, it's time to end the third tournament."

"How do we do this? This is a battle royale, so there should be a winner decided when one person's HP is zero, right?"

"It's rare, but I heard that the first BoB in North America was won by two people. The reason was that the person who should have won accidentally got an underhanded trick called «Gift Grenade»."

"Gift Grenade? What's that?"

"The losing player will throw a grenade to drag the enemy down—oh, here, this is for you."

Sinon reached her hand into her pouch and then pulled out a black ball object onto Kirito's right hand that reached out in reflex. She then set the countdown of the fruit-like grenade to 5 seconds.

This was the plasma grenade she got after she checked that Kirito defeated Death Gun and ran to Yamikaze on the west side of the rocky hill. At that moment, Sinon had already decided to use this to end this tournament.

Finally realizing what was placed in his hand, Kirito widened his eyes and got ready to throw it away instinctively.

To prevent him from doing this, Sinon wrapped both arms behind Kirito's back and held his hands in.

Soon after, an abnormally dazzling flash appeared between the two avatars, engulfing the wryly smiling Kirito and the smiling Sinon into pure whiteness.

The time taken for the tournament was 2 hours, 4 minutes and 37 seconds.

The 3rd Bullet of Bullets battle royale finals ended.

The result—[Sinon] and [Kirito] won at the same time.

Chapter 15

From the time she was being transported from the lone island «ISL Ragnarok» to the waiting area, Sinon kept looking at the rankings and the countdown till log out while trying to calm herself down.

Though the tournament was over, the situation with «Death Gun» wasn't. Death Gun's accomplice might still be near her in the real world. Kirito said that the police would be there soon, but his log out time would be the same as Sinon. Also, he would need to contact his associate, so it would take at least 10 minutes. During this time, Sinon could only protect herself.

First, she had to check if her own room was safe. Then, she had to get Shinkawa Kyouji to come over to her house. Though there was a chance that he would meet Death Gun, these people weren't using guns or knives as weapons, but syringes with poison—as that's Kirito's view—so they wouldn't randomly inject drugs into people who are awake. Of course, Sinon was ready to tell him to be careful.

The large countdown timer quickly flew by, and there were 10 seconds left till log out.

She looked at the large results screen one last time.

Sinon and Kirito, who won at the same time were glowing at the highest level. Even though her ultimate goal when playing GGO was to let her name appear there, unfortunately, the outcome this time would most likely not count. The situation was way too abnormal, so she would pin her hopes on the 4th tournament.

There was no 2nd place. The 3rd place was Death Gun's log in character name «Sterben». Sinon herself didn't know how the name should be read, but to the mantle guy, «Death Gun» should be his real name, so his log in name should be used to cover up his true identity.

The 4th place was «Yamikaze». Most of the people bet money on him as they felt that he would be the champion, so the official betting company should have earned a lot now. Starting from the 5th position, there were names that were more common, but after names like «Dyne» and «Xiahou Dun»—the ranking ended at 28.

The bottom most place showed the names of the two who disconnected, «Pale Rider» and «Garret».

As expected, there were 2 victims of Death Gun in this tournament. This meant that he had 2 accomplices. What kind of organization did those 3 people take part in a VRMMO, what kind of experience did they have that would cause them to take part in such a horrifying plot...

As the countdown timer went to zero, Sinon didn't feel the exhilaration of victory, but an abnormally cold chill.

A floating feeling descended on Shino, and as this feeling disappeared, she was already lying on her bed in her room in the real world.

No—it's possible that it wasn't just one person. She told herself not to immediately open her eyes or move about.

Shino didn't move at all but merely closed her eyes and started noticing her surroundings.

At this moment, there were some slight sounds that went into her ears. The first was her own breathing, and next, it was the heartbeat that was rather fast.

Bellowing down near the ceiling was the air-conditioner that was giving off warm air, and also, there was the humidifier that was letting out a buzzing sound. She could hear the sound of a vehicle running by from afar, and there was also a deep sound of a stereo woofer from a room in this apartment.

—But other than these sounds, there weren't any other strange sounds.

This time, Shino tried to take a deep breath softly. Her nose took in the particles of air, and there was just a little fragrance. Shino knew that it was the vanilla soap she placed above the storage box to act as air-freshener.

There wasn't anyone else in the room.

Even though she thought this way, Shino still couldn't open her eyes immediately. Maybe someone was watching her beside her bed—this fear remained in her heart.

No, even if it's not inside the room, he may be hiding in the kitchen or the bathroom...or the balcony...even in this small little suite, there were many places for a person to hide in if he or she wanted to. Also, there's a likelihood that he was hidden underneath the bed. No, I don't want to get up.

Right now, Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto should have contacted the police through his associate, and she should be able to hear the sirens of the patrol cars. In that case, maybe it would be most safe not to move.

As Shino thought about this and got ready to close her eyes tight--

The old air-conditioner suddenly lowered its temperature, and the icy wind that was blown up floated on Shino's exposed thighs. A cold air covered her skin, making her feel itchy in the nose.

Shino herself probably resisted for 2 seconds. Then, her eyebrows and nose curled up, giving off a clear sneeze that disobeyed the owner's respiratory system. Shino froze, waiting for a reaction to this sneeze from a certain point in this room.

However, there was still no movement in the room.

Shino then stealthily opened her right eye.

Inside the dark room that had the lights turned off, the street lights from the gap in the curtains were the only ones that brought some light. Shino checked first to be sure that it could be seen from her eyes, and then slowly turned her head around bit by bit to check her room.

Anyway, there didn't seem to be anyone in her view. Even though she just sneezed, Shino carefully took off the AmuSphere on her head and put it beside the pillow. She used the strength of her abdomen to raise herself and looked around the entire room quickly.

—It looked like it wasn't any different from before she dived in.

Whether it was the mineral water on the table, the large sound box beside the table or the school bag that's left on the floor, nothing was moved at all.

Shino placed her hand on the mattress and then moved it alongside the bed. She gulped her saliva down and then poked her body out to look underneath the bed. It was obviously empty underneath.

She looked up, and checked through the curtains that the lead windows were locked up.

Then, she got off the bed barefooted, reached her neck out to take note of any movements in the kitchen. Speaking of which, that space which was only 3 mats big didn't look like it had any place to hide.

At this moment, Shino finally got up and subconsciously walked to the wall before pressing the switch. The room was immediately lit with white light, and even the corridor on the back of the kitchen lit up.

Looking closely, the lock on the door didn't look like it was touched before. Shino stood for a while before noticing that there weren't any strange sounds from the place behind a wall—the bathroom. In the end, there wasn't anything strange. Thus, she again tiptoed towards the kitchen.

The bathroom door was tightly shut, but wasn't locked, and there wasn't any light inside.

Shino grabbed onto the aluminium door handle with her right hand that's full of cold sweat.

She took a deep breath, held it, and pulled the bathroom door aside as her left hand turned on the lights.

"..."

Shino wordlessly inspected the bathroom for a while.

"Why am I scaring myself..."

She muttered. The rice-colored bathroom was obviously empty.

This time, Shino finally lowered her neck and the shoulders on both sides to relax her body. She turned halfway around and leaned her entire body on the wall before sitting down.

There wasn't anyone else in the room, and she couldn't see any evidence of other people who have entered.

Of course, there was a possibility that—the intruder who broke the old electronic lock was using the handphone to check the live telecast of GGO through the phone, and left after seeing that Death Gun was defeated.

If that was the case, the intruder may still be near this apartment. As she couldn't guarantee that he would not turn back, she had to hurry up, call Shinkawa Kyouji and invite him to her house. Shino felt this way, but just couldn't motivate herself.

She glanced at the kitchen timer that's placed on the fridge. It also functioned as a clock, and the numbers indicated on it showed that it was 10:07pm.

—It was a long three hours. The yogurt container that's in the trash bag in front of her was thrown in before she dived in, but it seemed to be a long time ago.

And her own heart seemed to feel that something has changed, but it didn't.

However, at least the anxiety that resided in her for a long time was gone. During this long time, perhaps her anxious feeling of only realizing that she had to get stronger was all wasted. She had to slowly work her way up.

"Okay...!"

Shino softly encouraged herself and got up before realizing that she was extremely thirsty. She went near the basin, used the cup to catch the water that flowed out from the tap and gulped it down.

And just when she was about to drink another cup—

DING DONG. The doorbell rang at this moment..

Shino tensed her body instinctively and then turned to look at the door. She suddenly had the thought that the person may open the door himself and couldn't breathe at all.

Thinking about it, maybe it was the police. She then turned to look at the clock, but the time since she logged out was less than 3 minutes, and it would be too fast.

Just when Shino was standing there, the doorbell rang again. Shino held her breath and stealthily went to the door.

It's better to chain the door up. Just when she thought that way, she timidly reached her left hand out, but just when she was about to touch the door chain—

"Asada-san, are you there? It's me, Asada-san!"

The electronic lock that had a speaker function gave the slightly sharp voice of a boy. Shino was rather familiar with this voice.

Shino herself immediately heaved a sigh of relief. She stepped on the slippers and brought her face near the door, and then looked outside the door for safety reasons. She saw a boy standing in the corridor, looking distorted because of the concave effect. That person was the friend she

was ready to call to her house—the ex-classmate who invited Shino to play GGO, Shinkawa Kyouji.

"Shinkawa-kun...?"

Shino called the other person's name through the speaker, and then a somewhat hesitant voice came over.

"Well...I couldn't help but want to say congrats to you...I bought this from the convenience store, but it's just a little token of appreciation..."

After hearing these words, Shino again looked through the peephole. Kyouji outside was holding a small cake box.

"You, you're really quick..."

Shino couldn't help but question. Even after including the time for her to log out, it was only about 5 minutes ever since the tournament ended. Looking at things now, he probably didn't watch the telecast from his own house, but hung around at the park nearby and waited to buy the cake from the convenience store once it was decided before rushing here. His impulsive manner was really just like what the AGI-type Spiegel would do.

But this would remove the need to contact him herself. Shino exhaled and reached her hand out for the door.

"Hold on. I'm going to open the door."

She said as she lowered her head, and found that her upper body was still wearing a tank top and pair of shorts below that showed a lot of her thighs. The girl felt that this was somewhat revealing, but she still shrugged and opened the door.

After opening the door, the smiling Shinkawa Kyouji was standing at the door. He was wearing a pair of jeans below and a military coat with feathers on top. It looked thick, but just didn't look like it could resist the cold air outside.

Shino was trembling because of the cold air that came at her feet and started saying,

"Wah, it's cold. Hurry up and come in."

"U, un. Excuse me then."

Kyouji nodded his head, shrank his neck back and entered the corridor with the concrete floor. On seeing Shino, he narrowed his eyes as if his eyes hurt.

"Wha, what is it...hurry up and close the door, or else the room's going to get cold. Ah, remember to lock it."

Kyouji's eyes made Shino somewhat embarrassed, and she pretended to throw a tantrum to hide this feeling. She then turned around and walked towards the room. Behind her, the electronic sound of the door being locked could be heard. Shino returned to the 6 mat room, took the remote control on the table and adjusted the air temperature higher. The air conditioner bellowed in an exaggerated manner and breathed out warmer air that shook off the cold air in the room.

Shino quickly sat down on the bed, looked up, and found that Kyouji was standing at the door in a somewhat lost manner.

"Please take a seat. Ah...do you want a drink?"

"No need. There's no need for that."

"I'm tired now. There's nothing now if you really say so."

The girl said that jokingly, and Kyouji's face finally showed a smile. He placed the cake on the table next to the tea set and sat down on the cushion beside it.

"...I'm sorry for arriving so suddenly, Asada-san. But...as I said before, I really wanted to celebrate things with you fast."

He covered his knees like a kid and then looked up at Shino.

"Well...congratulations on becoming the BoB champion. Asada-san...Sinon was really amazing. You finally became the strongest gunman in GGO. But...I knew it. Asada-san would one day succeed. Because Asada-san had real strength like no others..."

"Thanks..."

Shino felt somewhat embarrassed, and thus, she shook her neck that shrank back.

"But there're two winners this time...and if you saw the live telecast, you should have seen that there were a lot of unnatural things that happened...maybe, the tournament will be declared as invalid..."

"Eh...?"

"Well...how should I put it..."

For a moment, Shino couldn't think of how to explain the «Death Gun» incident to the puzzled Kyouji. She didn't really know about the entire thing too, and couldn't continue on with the explanation. And—right now, even she started wondering that this may be like an illusion.

Maybe...

All these were merely caused by coincidence...? Could shooting someone in the virtual world really kill a player by poison in the real world? To be honest, Shino only saw Pale Rider being disconnected. If he and the other player who disconnected were really dead, it would mean that Death Gun's crimes were real, but Shino would have no definite proof until she had news that they died.

The police would come over in another 10 minutes, and then I should explain everything to Kyouji, right? Shino had this thought and changed the topic.

"Oh well...it's nothing. It's just that there was a strange player. But you were really quick. The tournament just ended 5 minutes ago."

"Ah, well...I came over near your house and used the handphone to watch the live feed so that I could immediately congratulate you..."

Kyouji hurriedly said this, and Shino smiled on seeing him like this.

"I had a feeling that it would be like that. It's cold outside. You'll catch a cold. Let me brew you some tea."

But Kyouji shook his head to stop Shino. His face gradually lost its smile, showing a nervous look. Shino could only blink.

"Well...Asada-san..."

"Wha, what is it?"

"I...saw the footage of the desert cave...on the telecast..."

Shino could guess from these words and Kyouji's expression what he didn't say out. Thinking about what happened back in the cave, Shino couldn't help but blush.

"Tha...that was..."

Shino forgot all about it—or rather, she deliberately forgot about it; but she was lying on Kirito's knees when he sat down at the wall, crying and screaming. Kyouji did see that footage. She could only say that she was too careless and caused things to end up like this.

Shino lowered her head in a sorry manner, but Kyouji continued on. She thought that he would ask her about her relationship with Kirito, but what he said next surprised Sinon.

"That guy...must have threatened you, right? You could only do that because he got something on you, right?"

"Wha, what?"

Shino looked up in surprise.

Kyouji's eyes were giving off a strange light as he bent forward in a half-kneel position. A hoarse voice came from his irregular moving lips,

"You were threatened by him, and even sniped at the player he was fighting against...but you made that guy relax and then brought him down with you with a grenade, right? But...I don't think that's enough, Asada-san. I said it before...you must show him some attitude..."

"Ah...that..."

Shino couldn't say anything, and then frantically thought of how to explain it.

"No...I wasn't threatened. I knew that it was too random in the tournament...but I nearly panicked when diving...and in this mess...I vented my anger on Kirito...that guy. Anyway, I said a lot of things too much."

"..."

Kyouji widened his eyes and silently listened to Shino.

"But...that guy infuriates me, but he felt...just like my mom. Because of that, I cried like a kid...it was really embarrassing, right?"

"...Asada-san...bu...but you did that because you relapsed, right? You...had no special feelings with that guy, right?"

"Eh...?"

"Asada-san, you said that you wanted me to wait for you, right?"

Kneeling down and bending forward, Kyouji looked extremely nervous.

"You said that before, right? If I wait, that you'll be mine, right? Tha...that's why I..."

"...Shinkawa-kun..."

"SAY IT! SAY THAT YOU HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT GUY. SAY THAT YOU HATE HIM!"

"Wha...what's with you...all of sudden..."

Shino did remember that she told Kyouji to 'wait for me' when they were at the park before the tournament.

However, the meaning was to 'wait until she finally shook off her demons'. And then she would become an ordinary girl once that day came.

"A...Asada-san, you're strong now that you became champion, so you won't relapse again. So you don't need that guy. I'll accompany you always. I'll...protect you forever."

Kyouji started muttering as if he was dreaming and stood up before swaying towards Shino and took a few steps—he then suddenly opened his arms and hugged Shino without holding back his strength.

"Uu...?"

Shino felt extremely tense as she was extremely shocked. The bones on her arms and abdomen started to ache, and the air in her lungs were squeezed out.

"...Shin...kawa-ku...n..."

The impact and force caused Shino to gasp. However, Kyouji exerted even more force and pressed his weight on Shino like he wanted to get her onto the bed.

"Asada-san...I like you. I love you. My Asada-san...my Sinon."

Kyouji's hoarse and breaking voice didn't sound like a love confession, but like a curse.

"Stop...it...!"

Shino tried her best to use both hands to support her body on the bed. She then exerted strength on her legs and used her right shoulder to nudge Kyouji's chest away—

"...Stop it!"

Though she could only give a hoarse voice, she finally managed to push Kyouji's body back, and took a large amount of breath like she was panting.

Kyouji himself tumbled onto the seat and fell backwards. He then ended up knocking into the teaset, and the box that had cake inside dropped and let out a little sound.

However, Kyouji himself didn't seem to notice it as he just continued to stare at Shino. The shocked expression on his face seemed to show that he wouldn't believe that Shino would reject him.

Those widened eyes soon lost their shine—and an empty voice came out of his trembling mouth,

"This won't do, Asada-san. You can't betray me. Only I can save Asada-san, so you can't look at other guys."

After saying that, he closed in on Shino.

"...Shin, Shinkawa-san..."

Shino was still shocked as she could only mutter in a dazed manner.

It's true that she felt a dangerous impulse in Shinkawa's eyes when she invited him over for dinner and when she was hugged by him at the park. However, Shino felt that it couldn't be helped to a certain extent as he was a guy, and she couldn't imagine that kind and feeble Shinkawa to do something out of control.

However, to Shino, who's unable to move on the bed, Shinkawa who's looking down at her, had a mysterious glint in his eyes that she never saw before.

Don't tell me Shinkawa-kun's going to rape me...

The interrupted thoughts flashed through Shino's mind, and the fear went through her body in a way that surpassed the impact.

However—

Though Shino was thinking in the right direction, it was of a completely different manner.

Kyouji opened his mouth slightly and let out a heavy breathing sound. He then reached his right hand into the military jacket and looked like he was holding something.

The right hand that he held out showed a rather strange object.

That thing was about 20cm long, made by translucent milky-white plastic.

The tip was tapered, and there was a cylinder about 3cm thick. At the back, there was a handle-like thing protruding out diagonally, and Kyouji's right hand was there. Also, his thumb was placed at the green button that's on the joint between the handle and the cylinder.

The tip of the round cylinder had a silver metal part on it, and what could be called a sharp tip had a little opening. Basically, it looked like a laser gun a kid was playing with, but it couldn't mask a certain function despite its simple look.

The right hand that was in Kyouji's hands trembled slightly, and then he placed the round cylinder carelessly on Shino's neck. That icy feeling made all the hairs on Shino's skin stand.

"Shin...kawa...kun...?"

Shino barely managed to squeeze these words out from her stiff lips, but before she could finish, Kyouji said with a deep voice,

"Don't move, Asada-san. You can't scream too. This...is called a needleless syringe. It has a drug called «Succinylcholine». The muscles can't move once this is injected, and the heart will soon stop."

If her brain really had a mental protection shell, Shino's shell would have several layers punctured in today.

The cold air that came from behind her neck made Shino's limbs go cold. Shino realized that her limbs were starting to stiffen as she racked her brain to understand what Kyouji meant.

What that meant was that—Kyouji wanted to kill Shino. If she didn't listen to him, he would use that toy-like syringe in his hand and inject that really long English-name drug into Shino's body to stop her heart.

Thinking about this, another corner of Shino's mind was thinking and asking herself, Is this a joke? How can Shinkawa-kun do such a thing? But in fact, Shino's lips didn't move as they felt like a ton. And the cold hard metal cylinder was pressed at her neck—or more accurate—it was 5cm below her left ear. This cold feeling continued to deny the possibility that Kyouji was joking.

Shino couldn't see Kyouji's expression as she was facing the light, but still stared at his face blankly. His still tender-looking round face twitched its chin slightly, shooting out a voice without restraint.

"It's alright, Asada-san. You don't have to be scared. Soon...we'll be together as one. I want to offer all the feelings I had accumulated all~this while to you. I'll inject it gently into you...so you won't feel any pain at all. Don't worry, just leave everything to me."

Shino couldn't understand anything of what he said at all. It really sounded like Japanese, yet it sounded like a language from a certain country. Two words continued to ring in her ears.

This is called a needleless syringe, and it can stop your heart.

Syringe, heart. It felt like...she heard these words somewhere before.

In the desert under the night sky, inside the small cave, the boy who looked like a girl said this before. «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako» may have had a certain drug injected into them that caused heart failure...but that seemed like something that happened in a distant dreamland.

In that case—tha—that means...

Shino's lips moved like they were numb, and then, she heard her own hoarse voice.

"That...that means...you...you're the other «Death Gun»?"

The syringe that was placed at the neck suddenly jerked. Kyouji gave an admiring smile like how he would when talking to Shino.

"...Heh, that's too amazing. As expected of Asada-san...you saw through the secret of «Death Gun». That's right. I'm the other «Death Gun». Even so, «Sterben» before this BoB was controlled by me. I'm really happy that you saw me shoot Zekushiido in the Gurokken bar. But, for today, I want to be active in the real world. I can't accept other guys touching Asada-san. Even if we were brothers."

This umpteenth shock caused Shino's body to tense up again.

Kyouji did mention before that he had an older brother, but he merely mentioned how this brother of his was always sick ever since young and always moved from home to hospital. He never said anything other than that, so Shino never asked.

"B...bro...brother? The one who joined the red guild in SAO...was...your brother?"

This time, it was Kyouji's turn to widen his eyes in shock.

"Wow, so you even knew about that. Shoichi nii-san said that much in the tournament? Maybe nii-san really admired Asada-san. But Asada-san, you can relax. I won't let anyone else touch you. Actually...I didn't intend to inject this into Asada-san. Nii-san may get angry...but because Asada-san, you said that you'll be mine in the park..."

Kyouji paused. The intoxicated smile on his face disappeared, and his expression went back to being blank.

"...But...Asada-san, and that guy, actually...you must have been tricked by him. I don't know what that guy said, but I'll chase him away immediately. I'll make you forget about him."

As the syringe was still held at Shino's neck, Kyouji used his left hand to grab Shino's right shoulder and pressed Shino down onto the bed like that. He then got up the bed and moved onto Shino's thighs. While doing that, he was still murmuring like he was daydreaming,

"...Don't worry, I won't let Asada-san be alone. I'll accompany you immediately after. We shall be reborn in GGO...no, in a more fantasy-like game, and then we'll become husband and wife and have a wonderful life. We'll have adventures...and then we'll have kids. That'll be great!"

Though Shino heard the nonsensical ramblings from Kyouji, that numb part of her thinking ability was still thinking—the police will be here soon, so I have to talk to him more.

"But...if you're not here as a partner, your brother will be troubled, right...an..and, I didn't get shot in the game. If I die, that Death Gun rumor you guys worked hard to build on will be doubted."

Shino continued to move her dry tongue as she said all that, and Kyouji moved the syringe in his right hand and pressed onto Shino's collarbone, revealing a stiff smile.

"Don't worry. There were three targets today, so nii-san brought another person also. That was another guild member of his during SAO. That person would soon take over my position, and...how can I put Asada-san in the same conversation as trash like Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako? Asada-san's not Death Gun's belonging, but mine. Once Asada-san goes off...I'll bring you to the endless abyss, and then I'll follow after. So, please wait for me halfway there."

Kyouji's left hand carefully moved up into Shino's abdomen inside the tank top timidly. He touched with his fingertips a few times before using his entire hand.

The fear and irritation made Shino get goosebumps, but she really wanted to talk on. If she moved or screamed, the seemingly gentle boy in front of her would definitely press the syringe. Unfortunately, Kyouji's voice and expression showed that he would definitely do this. Thus, Shino could only keep her cool and say,

"...We, well...you haven't used this syringe in the real world, right...? The...there's still time. You can start afresh. Don't think of dying...you still have the high-school equivalent of General Scholastic Ability Test? And there's still remedial classes, right? Don't you want to be a doctor...?"

"General Scholastic Ability Test...?"

Kyouji tilted his head like he heard that term for the first time. He repeated it a few times before finally going 'ahh...'. The left hand left Shino and reached inside the jacket.

He took out a thin piece of paper from his pocket.

"Do you want to take a look?"

He gave a self-mocking smile and handed the piece of paper over to Shino.

Shino was rather familiar with this paper that had certain numbers on them—that's the mock exam results slip. However, the scores and segments for each subject could be said to be so bad that nobody could believe it.

"Sh...Shinkawa-kun...this is..."

"It's funny, isn't it? To think that there's such a rating..."

"Bu...but, your parents..."

What Shino meant was that 'your parents would still let you play with the AmuSphere after seeing such scores', and Kyouji immediately understood what she wanted to say.

"Fufu, this sort of results slip...I can make it with a printer. Besides, I told my parents that I was wearing the AmuSphere for long-distance learning. They won't help me with GGO's monthly fees, but that small sum of money can be earned easily from the game...it should be easy to earn it, originally..."

The smile on Kyouji's face suddenly disappeared. He frowned, and the gritted teeth were exposed.

"...I had enough of this boring world. Whether it's my parents...those guys at school, they're all bastards. Once I become the strongest in GGO...I'm satisfied. At...at first, «Spiegel» was supposed to be the strongest player..."

Shino felt Kyouji's hand trembling from the syringe that's placed at her neck, and held her breath as she was worried that Kyouji would press it.

"But...Zekushiido, that scumbag...lying about how AGI-type are the strongest...that damned bastard caused Spiegel to be unable to even equip an M16...damn it...damn it..."

The anger in Kyouji's voice was so deep that nobody could tell that he was talking about the game.

"Now...I can't even earn my monthly connection fee...GGO's my everything...I gave up on everything in the real world..."

"...So that's why....that's why you killed Zekushiido...?"

Though she was thinking whether he killed him because of this reason, Shino still asked that. Kyouji blinked hard a few times and then showed a drunken smile.

"Yeah. To create the legend of «Death Gun» being the strongest in GGO...no, in all the VRMMOs, that guy would be the best sacrifice! Once I kill Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako, then Pale Rider and Garret who appeared in this tournament, no matter how foolish the other players are, they'll know that Death Gun really has the ability to kill. The strongest...I'm the strongest..."

Perhaps unable to restrain the excitement rising inside him, Kyouji's entire body started to tremble.

"...Now there's no need to waste time in such a boring world.
Here...Asada-san. Let's evolve into the «next step»."

"Shi...Shinkawa-kun..."

Shino desperately shook her head and pleaded to Kyouji.

"No. You...can still head back. You can still start afresh. Come along and surrender yourself with me..."

"..."

But Kyouji merely looked afar and shook his head.

"...There's nothing worth living for in the real world. Come, be one with me, Asada-san..."

That left hand started patting Shino's face as it accompanied his feeble voice, and his fingers went around Shino's hair.

Kyouji's fingertips were very dry. As the cracks on the fingers stroked Shino's soft skin near her ear, she could feel a slight pain. However, Kyouji looked like he didn't notice Shino's expression as he continued on like he was daydreaming,

"Asada-san...my Asada-san...I always liked you...ever since I...heard about Asada-san's situation...in school...I always..."

"...Eh..."

Shino hesitated for a bit before realizing what Kyouji was saying. But after thinking about it, she couldn't help but widen her eyes.

"Wha...what's...going on..."

"I always liked you...always admired you..."

"...Then you..."

Shino muttered in her head 'no way', and then asked with a voice that was about to disappear,

"You...talked to me...because you knew about that incident...?"

"Of course."

Kyouji's left hand stroked Shino's face like he was comforting a kid and then nodded passionately.

"I think if there's a girl who once used a real gun to shoot and kill someone, you'll be the only one in all of Japan who had done that. That's really amazing. Didn't I say that Asada-san has real power? That's why I chose the «Type-54 handgun» to create the ultimate weapon of «Death Gun». Asada-san's the one I admired the most. I love you...I love you...I love you more than anyone else..."

"...How is that...possible..."

—To think that there's such an eccentric person.

Shino once thought that this boy was the only friend she could get along with other than her relatives. However—his mind was already in another world. Ever since the beginning, both of them had a huge gap between them that couldn't be measured.

Shino's heart finally sank into the abyss of despair. Her vision, hearing and all her sense lost their significance as the world gradually left her.

Shino lost all her strength in her body.

In her vision that lost focus, Kyouji's eyes above her were looming like black holes. Those eyes looked as if they were tunnels to the deep dark world—

They were the eyes of that guy.

That guy who was hiding in the shadows of the night streets, the window openings, «Death Gun»'s mask and all the darkness, looking for a chance, still came back in the end.

Shino's fingers immediately went cold. The feelings of her fingertips started to leave her body and consciousness, and her entire soul shrank.

In the deepest area of this shell called the human body, Shino who was trapped in the small and cramped darkness returned back to the time when she was a kid, all curled up. She didn't want to see or feel anything.

The 16 years she lived were so icy and cruel. It took the father she had never seen before, took her mother's heart, and even took away a part of Shino's soul with great malice.

The adults in this world who saw her would look interested as if they were looking at some strange animal and also had intense irritation in them. Kids at the same age however mocked her and humiliated her.

But this world itself didn't seem satisfied as it wanted to take Shino's life while she already had nothing. She really didn't want to admit that this was the one «truth» in this world.

However, this wasn't reality. These were just certain things that happened in this overlapping world. In these worlds, there should be «a world where nothing happened».

Not knowing Shinkawa Kyouji, not going through the post office incident, her father not having died in the traffic accident. A certain world should have an ordinary Asada Shino living a peaceful life. Shino curled in the darkness and gradually became a lifeless thing, but her soul kept pushing her to look for her smiling profile in the warm sun.

At this moment, Shino suddenly felt an urge to argue back at herself from the irony.

If she was unable to accept the cruel reality and escape into fantasy, wouldn't she be like Shinkawa Kyouji to some extent.

Bullied at school, being treated like that by his parents, the heavy pressure of exams...Shinkawa Kyouji gave up on these «realities» and went to the virtual world for redemption. Kyouji believed that if he could get the title of the 'strongest' in the virtual world, he would be able to cover over that weak him in the real world. But now that the wish vanished, he crashed too.

Like Kyouji, Shino yearned to be the strongest in the world called Gun Gale Online, and she felt that this goal would form some sort of inspiration, and she thought that she found a way to settle her own problems.

The icy cold hand that came from deep inside Shino's swamp of memories finally grabbed her and got ready to drag her into the dark abyss. However, she couldn't resist, and couldn't even open her eyes. Every effort was futile.

Shino could only think in an interrupted manner like water bubbles floating up from the riverbed, however, she suddenly remembered...

If it's that guy, what will he do?

That boy who was locked in the virtual prison for 2 years, took a few lives in it, should have lost important people in his long battle. He should have felt regret over it, right? He would definitely hate the virtual world that took lots of things, correct?

No, he wouldn't do that. No matter what sort of trials he faced, he wouldn't abandon the responsibility he had. It's because he was that sort of person that he was able to win in that battle of despair against Death Gun.

—You're really strong, Kirito.

Shino muttered deep inside the dark abyss.

—You finally managed to save me...but I betrayed your kind intents. I'm sorry...

Kirito said that he would get the police over once he logged out. She didn't know how much time elapsed since she logged out, but it looked like it was too late. It's unknown what sort of thoughts he would have if he knew that Shino was killed. This really made her worry...

Thinking about that, her thoughts started to create a chain reaction, and a certain worry lit the darkness in the girl's heart like a weak lamp.

Kirito---will it be over after that lightsaber warrior contacted his associate? Maybe he might even drive over to my apartment. But even in this case, it'll be too late. Once Kirito meets Shinkawa Kyouji in this room, Kyouji might do something. He might run away or stop struggling...or rather, will he attack Kirito with the syringe in his hand? From the way Kyouji showed his hatred against Kirito, it was likely that he would do that.

Maybe she was destined to die.

But—after thinking about how it would involve that boy—that would--

That would be a different case altogether.

...Even so, there's no other way.

The young Shino, who was lying in the midst of darkness, was all curled up and refused to receive any information through the eyes or ears. At this moment, the sniper girl with the desert-colored muffler, Sinon, knelt beside her, placed her hand on the slender shoulders and said softly,

...Up till now, we had only been looking out for ourselves, fighting for ourselves, so we couldn't hear Shinkawa's inner voice. But—it may be too late, but we should at least fight for others.

Shino opened her eyes slowly while she was sinking in the darkness. A white, slender yet strong hand reached out to her. Shino timidly grabbed that hand.

Sinon from the game smiled and helped Asada Shino out. She moved her pink lips and said clearly.

Come, let's go.

Both of them kicked the darkness and started moving up to the light at the water surface.

Shino blinked hard and again returned to the real world.

Kyouji was still holding the syringe in his right hand as he pressed it against Shino's neck, and his left hand was trying to take off Shino's tank top. However, he wasn't able to take it off with one hand, and showed an anxious expression. Soon after, he started tugging at the fabric that was about to be torn.

Shino pretended to be pulled by him and turned her body left. The tip of the syringe slid off from Shino's body and stabbed into the bed.

Shino immediately used this chance to grab the cylinder with her left hand, and then used her right palm to strongly press at Kyouji's lower jaw.

'Gu!', with a sound of impact, Kyouji went backwards, and the weight that was pressing down on Shino's body disappeared. She then used her right hand to push a few times and then tugged at the syringe with her left hand. If she didn't use this chance, her last hope will then vanish.

However, Kyouji was using his better hand to grab the handle, and Shino merely grabbed the slippery cylinder with her left hand, so Shino was in a disadvantage in this tug-of-war. Kyouji recovered and pulled his right hand back, making a strange sound as he swung his left hand.

"Gu...!"

His fist landed hard on Shino's right shoulder. As the syringe was plucked out from her left hand, Shino rolled back from the front edge of the bed. She hit the writing desk with her back, and one of the drawers slid out, dropped and scattered things all over the place.

Having been injured in the back, Shino was immediately unable to breathe and could only pant to get air. Kyouji was pressing his lower jaw on the bed, but he immediately lifted his head and looked at Shino.

His eyes were rounded, and the lips that were glowing with saliva were numb. From the way he was bleeding on the lips, it looked like he bit his own tongue. Soon after, he let out a hoarse voice,

"Why...?"

He slowly shook his head, seemingly feeling disbelief.

"Wh, why must it be like this...? Asada-san only has me! I'm the only one who understands Asada-san! I've always been helping you...always been protecting you..."

On hearing his words, Shino recalled a few days ago. As she was on the way back from school, she was surrounded by Endo and the rest and was extorted, and Kyouji just happened to pass by and save her—

Looking at things now, it wasn't a coincidence.

It was likely that Kyouji tailed Shino every day after she left school until she entered her own house, and would log into GGO to wait for Shino to enter the game.

That could only be called madness. Shino seemed to realize a little that he had some dangerous aspect about him, but never noticed this terrifying nature of his at all. Was this the result of not being open with someone? Even in this situation, Shino still felt bitter inside.

"Shinkawa-kun..."

Shino moved her stiff lips and said,

"...Everything's painful...but I still like this world. I guess I'll like it more in the future. So...I can't go with you."

As she said that, Shino got ready to get up. While supporting herself on the floor with the right hand, her fingertips felt something heavy and cold.

She immediately knew what it was. That was an object she always hid deep inside that drawer. It was the symbol of all her fears in the real world. It was the participation prize she had in the 2nd BoB tournament—the model gun «Procyon SL».

Shino fumbled with her fingers before grabbing it, and then slowly raised this heavy handgun at Kyouji.

The gun in her hand felt abnormally cold like ice. Shino's right hand immediately felt slowed, and the numbness crept up her arm.

She knew that this wasn't the cold freezing feeling in the real world. Even though she knew that it was a mental rejection, she couldn't stop this feeling from happening. That fear which couldn't be explained came out from deep inside her heart like black liquid.

The white wallpaper that was speck-clean seemed to shake like water, and the grey concrete cracks behind the wall started to appear in front of her. The wood-based floor faded in color and became a green flax carpet. The protruding windows became the counter too. As Shino recovered, she found out that she was standing in the middle of an old post office.

Kyouji's face that was being pointed at suddenly melted. His skin changed to a person with oily yellow skin, lots of wrinkles, and a set of yellow teeth in the dry mouth. The syringe in his right hand unknowingly became the old automatic handgun that was giving a dark glow—and the gun in Shino's hand became the same thing.

Predicting what would happen next, Shino sank into extreme panic. Her stomach felt like it was pushed up, and her muscles tensed up.

No, I don't want to look. I really want to throw aside this Blackstar in my hand and get away from here.

But if she ran away here, everything would be wasted. The things that were as important as her life would also disappear.

She was fighting her fear as Asada Shino when she relapsed, and she was fighting against many powerful foes as the sniper Sinon. Perhaps these experiences would never bring any outcome. But—

This so-called strength is the process of moving forward.

Shino gritted her teeth and cocked the gun with her thumb. The apparition that appeared in front of Shino disappeared with this hard and heavy sound.

Kyouji, who knelt on the bed, watched the Procyon SL that was pointed at him and backed away slightly. Perhaps feeling scared, he continued to blink.

He opened his mouth, and the hoarse voice then followed.

"...What do you want to do, Asada-san. Tha...that's just a model gun, right? Do you really think that that thing can stop me?"

Shino placed her left hand on the table, exerting strength into her lifeless legs to get up and answered Kyouji,

"You said it before. I have real power. You said it before that there aren't any other girls who used a handgun to shoot someone else before."

"..."

Kyouji's face turned as white as paper and tensed up, backing away.

"So this isn't a model gun any more. Once I press this trigger, I'll shoot a real bullet to kill you."

Shino pointed the handgun at Kyouji and then slowly moved to the kitchen.

"Yo...you want to...kill...me...?"

Kyouji muttered like he was daydreaming and slowly shook his head.

"Asada-san wants...to kill me...?"

"Yes. You'll be the only one going to that world."

"NO...NO...I DON'T WANT...TO BE ALONE...!!!"

Kyouji's eyes lost all signs of consciousness. He looked up at the space blankly and knelt down on the bed.

Seeing his right hand loosen up and the syringe nearly falling completely onto the bedsheet, Shino hesitated over whether she should use this chance to snatch that thing. However, if she agitated Kyouji, he may really lose his senses and attack. Thus, Shino continued to move slowly to the kitchen.

When her eyes couldn't see Kyouji, she immediately kicked the floor and ran to the door.

A mere 5m distance felt so far away. She tried her best not to let out any footsteps as she moved past the kitchen. As she ran to the corridor and stepped onto it...

The mat slid backwards, and Shino fell down. She swung her right hand to get balance, and the model gun flew out and landed in the basin, creating a loud sound.

Even though she didn't manage to fall, the left kneecap hit the floor, causing Shino to feel pain. However, she continued to try and reach her body out and use her right hand to grab the door handle.

However, the door wouldn't budge. At this moment, Shino noticed that the door was still locked and gritted her teeth while unlocking it.

CLAK. Just as the sound of the door unlocking reached Shino's fingers—

An icy hand held her right ankle hard.

"...!"

Shino held her breath and looked back, and found that the distraught Kyouji was lying on the floor and grabbing her foot. She did not know where the syringe went.

Shino tried to shake him off and moved her foot about, and her hand went all the way, reaching out to try and pull the door open. However, her fingers did touch the door handle, but she didn't hold it. That's because Kyouji's amazing strength pulled her back.

Even after Kyouji pulled her to the kitchen for several centimeters, Shino still used her left hand to grab the step of the corridor to resist.

If she screamed here, her voice may reach outside. But just when Shino was about to scream out, her throat got stuck and couldn't take in air, causing only a hoarse voice.

Kyouji's strength could be said to be far more than usual. That skinny body of his which was only about as tall as Shino showed such arm power from nothing. Shino's left hand was finally pulled away from the step, and she was then pulled deep into the kitchen.

Kyouji's face immediately pressed down. Even though Shino held her right hand tight and got ready to push at his lower chin, Kyouji grabbed it with his left hand the moment she touched the skin. That wrist felt as tight as a tiger clamp, and a sharp pain exploded deep inside her brain.

"AsadasanAsadasanAsadasan…"

After a while, Shino realized that the strange sound Kyouji was making was actually her name. Kyouji's face lost all focus and his mouth was giving off white foam as he slowly brought his mouth close in. The mouth he brought over was really big, showing two rows of teeth that looked like they were ready to rip Shino's skin away. Shino wanted to push him away with her left hand, but her left hand was soon grabbed by Kyouji's right hand.

Shino's hands were restrained, but she intended to wait for Kyouji to close in and bite his neck. Just when Shino's mouth was becoming tense for that moment—

A sudden gust of cold air blew past Shino's shoulders. Kyouji looked up behind Shino, and his eyes and mouth were open wide.

Just when Shino was thinking about what happened, a black whirlwind rushed in front of her from the door that was opened unknowingly—it should be someone, at least, as he used his knee to smash into Kyouji's face.

Dodo, with that sound, Shino could only look flabbergasted as she watched the mysterious intruder who rolled into the room with Kyouji.

Kyouji, who collapsed onto the floor, was bleeding from the nose and the mouth, and a young man she never met before was on him.

That person had slightly long black hair, and he was dressed in a similarly black rider suit. Shino thought that he could be another resident from the apartment, but once the guy—or boy turned around to shout, Shino immediately knew his true identity.

"HURRY UP AND GET AWAY, SINON! GET SOMEONE TO HELP!"

"Kiri…"

As she muttered blankly, Shino hurriedly got up. She knew she had to get away from this place as soon as possible, but her feet just wouldn't follow.

Finally, Shino grabbed the edge of the sink and finally managed to stand up. So he did personally come over from Ochinomizu. This meant that the police would be here soon. At that time, Shino forced herself to move her weak legs towards the entrance and ran a few steps—

Shino remembered something important.

Kyouji had a fatal weapon. She had to warn Kirito.

Just when she turned around and got ready to shout,

Kyouji, who was pressed down on the floor, completely lost his senses and let out a wild beast like howl. Kirito's body was then pushed aside, and both of them swapped places.

"SO IT'S…….YYYYYYYYYYYYYOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUU!!!"

Kyouji's roar sounded like the echo from a large audio speaker, and the volume was so loud it nearly broke the eardrums of those near him.

"DON'T YOU GET NEAR MY ASADA-SAAANNNN!!!"

Kirito was ready to support his body, but Kyouji's left fist hit his face and let out a heavy impact sound. Kyouji then reached his right hand into the jacket pocket and took out that savage gun-shaped syringe.

"KIRITO—!"

Just when Shino shouted that…

"GOOOOO TOOOOOO HEEEEEEEELLLLLL!!!!!!!"

Kyouji roared out.

Byutsu~ The high pressure syringe stabbed into Kirito's chest, on the T-shirt that showed itself under the rider's jacket, and let out a soft, sharp yet clear sound.

What was terrifying was that the sound was really similar to the high-capability silencers installed on guns.

Of course, Shino only knew about the sound effects of the imaginary guns in Gun Gale Online, and in fact, she didn't know what the sound would be like if it was silenced in real life. However, to Shino, who was familiar with this sound, it meant that she should step up and face the threat. The moment she recovered, she found herself running forward.

She took a few steps, rushed past the kitchen and then subconsciously looked for the most effective weapon. Finally, she chose the stereo on the table, and grabbed the handle with her right hand.

This machine Shino used for a long time had quite some history, and it could be said to be abnormally big, about as large as modern wall-speakers. Shino used her waist to support this rectangular body that was less than 3kg and quickly swung it behind her—

And then used centrifuge force to hit the left side of Kyouji's face, which was showing a smile that looked like he lost it.

Shino almost didn't feel any shock or feeling when she struck him, but after Kyouji was sent flying away fast, his head hit the corner edge of the bedframe, letting out a heavy sound that still clearly remained in her ears.

After half a second, Kyouji, who was struck on both sides of the head, moaned as he collapsed onto the floor. His right hand was loosened, and the high pressure syringe rolled out.

Shino didn't know whether that thing could continuously inject drugs, but she still took it. Kyouji was already showing white eyes and moaning away. It seemed that he was unable to move for the time being.

Shino thought about using a belt or something to tie Kyouji's hands up, but before that, there was something more important for her to do. She then turned around…

"Kirito…!"

She gave a soft cry and knelt down beside the boy.

This boy who was as tender looking as his character in the game recognized Shino and said with a hoarse voice,

"I've been had…to think…that he would have a syringe…"

"Where? Where were you stabbed?"

Throwing the syringe aside, Shino hurriedly undid Kirito's rider jacket zipper.

I have to call the hospital. But before that, I have to do immediate emergency first aid. But what should I do to clear the toxin from the chest"—Shino's mind continued to be filled with random thoughts, and her fingers started trembling.

Under the jacket was a faded blue T-shirt, and what just landed straight on the heart was a worrying stain. She didn't know how much «piercing ability» the syringe had, but it shouldn't be something that could be blocked by a thin T-shirt.

"You can't die…you can't die like this!"

Shino wailed in a tiny voice as she rolled up the T-shirt from the jeans.

That flat stomach and chest of Kirito's were immediately exposed, and his skin was rather white for a guy. However, slightly right from the center of the chest, where the T-shirt stain was—there was something stuck on it.

"…?"

Shino looked bewildered as she looked at that object.

It was a round object that was about 3cm thick. The silver round plate had a suction cap that was made from yellow rubber. Also, there was something on the edge of the round pad that looked like a socket, but there wasn't anything on it.

The metal circle was completely wet on the surface, and there was a thin fluid flowing down. That transparent fluid should be the fatal drug «Succinylcholine» that Kyouji said.

Shino hurriedly looked around the floor, and on finding the tissue paper box, she drew two out and then carefully wiped the fluid away. She brought her face a few centimeters away from Kirito's chest, and then thoroughly checked for any high-pressure fluid injected in near the mysterious pad.

No matter how she looked, Kirito's chest didn't look like it had any damage. The high pressure syringe seemed to have pierced through the T-shirt and hit the metal circle pad that was only a few centimeters wide, and the liquid that was injected was blocked by this hard object on the outside. She tried to place her hand on the pad, and immediately felt a strong and forceful heartbeat.

Shino blinked and moved her eyes up, seeing that Kirito's face was moaning and keeping his eyes closed.

"Hey…listen to me…"

"Uu…I can't make it…I can't breathe…"

"Hey, listen to me."

"…Damn it…I can't think of…any last words…at this moment…"

"What's this that's stuck on you?"

"…Eh?"

Kirito again widened his eyes, lowered his head and looked at his chest. He then frowned in surprise and used his right hand finger to touch the metal circle pad.

"…Don't tell me…the drug hit this place?"

"Seems that way…what's going on?"

"…Well…that should be the electrode of the ECG…"

"Wha…what? Why is there such a thing…is your heart bad…?"

"Not really…just a means to counter «Death Gun»…that, that's right, I was panicking so the cable snapped and there was still one on me…"

Kirito forcefully heaved a sigh and said softly,

"Really…I was nearly scared to death…"

"I…"

Shino used both hands to grab Kirito on the collar and lifted him.

"—I WAS THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE SAYING THAT! I…I THOUGHT THAT YOU WERE DEAD THERE!!"

Perhaps after shouting, all her tension disappeared as Shino suddenly felt darkness in front of her eyes. She slowly shook her head and looked at Kyouji who collapsed slightly afar.

"Is…he still alive?"

As Kirito asked her, Shino timidly reached her hand out to hold Kyouji's limp right wrist. Luckily, his hand was giving a clear pulse. Shino had the thought of wanting to tie Kyouji up, but she really couldn't look straight at him now that his eyes were closed, and could only look away. Shino didn't want to think about Kyouji anymore. Even though she didn't have any anger or sadness in that, there was a severe emptiness in her.

Shino kneeled down and blankly stared at the high-pressure syringe that rolled onto the floor—she should call it the real «Death Gun». A few seconds later, she finally spoke up,

"Anyway…thanks for coming over to help…"

Kirito smiled like usual and then shook his head.

"Don't worry…I didn't really help much…and I was nearly late, so, sorry. Because Kiku…my associate didn't really understand my explanation…are you alright?"

Shino nodded her head.

At this moment, a fluid flowed out from her eyes.

"Eh…that's strange…"

Even though her mind was blank and couldn't think, the tears that flowed down the face continued to land on the floor.

Shino kept quiet, and tears just streamed out from her eyes. She knew that if she started talking, she would start crying.

And Kirito didn't do anything as well as he remained silent.

After a while, Shino noticed the police car siren that came from afar, but her tears didn't have any intention of stopping. The large tears silently rolled down, and she realized—that the emptiness in her chest came from the heavy loss.

Chapter 16

At this point, the wide sky would make people think of the vast galaxy behind it.

This «wideness of the sky» was a feeling that a virtual reality would never be able to duplicate. The autumn season that passed seemed to be all forgotten, and the blue sky looks like herds of sheeps as they gathered high in the air together with the thick clouds. The fine cables had two sparrows standing there, and the military airplane that was flying in the air reflected the sunlight back.

Shino stared at this vast and endless scenery, and she looked like she wouldn't be irritated by it.

The wind now would be considered warm for mid-December, and the after school noise from students wouldn't reach the back of the school. Normally, the sky in the capital of Tokyo would be covered with a thin grey, but today, it looked like a town in the north. Shino sat beside the flowerbed with black soil and placed her bag on her knees. And then, she let her soul move through the unlimited space for about 10 minutes.

However, a moment later, several footsteps accompanied by laughter were heard as they got near to Shino and pulled her back from space to earth.

She turned her neck that was trying its best to look up, pulled her white shawl and waited for those intruders to walk near.

Endou and her two companions came in from the northwest area of the school building and the large incinerator. They smirked upon seeing Shino and showed cruel smiles.

Shino's left hand took up the bag and said,

"Since you took the initiative to invite me, don't be late."

After hearing Shino say that, a lackey of Endou blinked her thick eyelids, kept her smile and shouted,

"Asada, you're really mischievous nowadays, aren't you!"

The other lackey said with a similar tone,

"Yeah~ isn't this too much to treat your friends like that?"

The 3 people, who were about 2m away from Shino, each thought that they could give threatening looks which they thought would be most effective. Shino stared hard at the predatory insect-like narrow eyes belonging to Endou who was standing in the center.

Both of them remained silent for a few seconds. Endou then smiled and lifted her chin.

"Oh well, we're friends anyway. Oh yeah, if we have troubles, you should help us. We're a little tight here..."

On hearing her say that, the other two started laughing.

"So just lend us 20,000 yen first."

Endou said that in a tone like she was borrowing a rubber eraser.

Shino took off her NXT optical glasses that didn't even have a prescription on the lens, and put it in her skirt pocket. She gave the sternest of looks at Endou's trio, and said each word out clearly.

"I said it before. I don't have money to lend you."

At this moment, Endou's eyes narrowed like cables. She gave a stubborn look from her face and said with a deeper voice,

"...Don't think you can continue to be so arrogant. Speaking of which, I really brought that thing with me from nii-san, so don't go crying, Asada."

"...Whatever."

Shino thought that these people wouldn't be so daring as to take out a gun near school, but Endou actually smirked and reached her hand into her school bag.

A black automatic pistol was whipped out from that bag which had lots of dolls hanging on it. This scene really gave a little sense of black comedy. Endou gingerly pulled out the large model gun and then pointed it at Shino with her right hand.

"I heard that this can blow a hole in a thick cardboard. Nii-san told me not to use it to shoot someone, but you won't listen to that right, Asada? You're used to it."

Shino's eyes were naturally taken in by the black handgun.

Her heartbeat hastened. The ringing in her ears caused all other sounds to leave. She started breathing hard, and an icy feeling started to move up her fingertips.

However, Shino gritted her teeth and motivated all her mental strength to look away from the the gun's profile. Her eyes moved from Endou's right hand that was holding the gun, then started moving to the arm, and then to the shoulder, the dyed hair and finally Endou's face.

Endou's eyes were pulsating with her blood vessels showing due to over excitement, and the irises were turning to an ugly black. The owner of the handgun was just a pitiful worm who's drunk in violence.

The real terror wasn't the gun itself, but the person holding it.

Perhaps because Shino didn't give the expected response, Endou anxiously smirked and said these words.

"Cry, Asada. Kneel down and beg for forgiveness. Or else I'll really shoot."

Then, she aimed the model gun at Shino's left shoulder before smiling. Her shoulders and arms jerked slightly, and Shino immediately knew that she was going to squeeze the trigger. However, the bullet didn't fire.

"Damn it, what's going on!?"

Though she squeezed the trigger a few more times, she could only hear the sound of plastic rubbing against each other.

Shino took a deep breath, gained strength all over her body, threw the bag onto the floor and reached her arms out.

She used her left thumb to press down hard on Endou's right wrist, and got the gun while her grip weakened. She then slid the index finger into the trigger guard, and the grip easily landed in her hands. The gun felt like plastic, but it was heavy.

"A 1911 Government? Your brother really likes such traditional designs. Just doesn't fit my tastes, though."

Shino said that and showed the left side of the gun at Endou.

"The Government has a thumb safety and a grip safety, and you can't shoot it without disengaging these two safeties."

Clak, clak. With these two sounds, both safeties were removed.

"Also, it's a single-action gun, so you have to cock the hammer right from the beginning."

Shino flicked the hammer up with her thumb, and the trigger lifted up slightly with a little hard sound.

She turned her eyes from the stunned Endou and company and looked around, found a row of blue plastic bins about 6m away beside the incinerator, and there happened to be a can on it.

Shino then placed her left hand on the grip and got into a basic sidearms shooting stance. She lined her right eye with the sights, aimed it at the empty can, considered for a while, lifted the gun up a little, held her breath, and squeezed the trigger.

'PA'. With a soft sound, a little recoil was sent to Shino's hand. This Government did really show recoil, and the orange bullet flew out.

As Shino wasn't familiar with the trajectory of this gun, she thought that the first bullet would miss. However, the bullet luckily grazed the top of the empty can, which shocked Shino herself. The aluminum can let out a 'Klang', spun like a spinning top and finally fell and dropped from the bin.

Fuu, Shino sighed and placed the gun down. Endou's arrogance was already long gone as she could only stand there in shock. As Shino looked at her eyes, she timidly closed her mouth and took half a step back.

"No...no..."

After hearing her terrified sound, Shino relaxed her stern glance.

"...It's true that it's better not to use this to shoot others."

She said that as she lowered the hammer before engaging the 2 safeties. As Shino handed over the gun, Endou's body jerked, but still reached out for the model gun timidly.

Shino grabbed her school bag and again tugged at her shawl. She said goodbye to the 3 people behind her and started walking forward. However, Endou and company didn't respond at all. The trio could only stand there blankly until Shino went around the corner and disappeared.

The moment she couldn't see Endou, Shino's legs immediately lost their strength as she nearly collapsed onto the floor. She finally managed to stand up by supporting herself on the school building.

A thunderclap rang inside Shino's ears, and the blood was flowing quickly through her temples. The reverse flow of acid made her throat hurt slightly. If anyone was to tell her to do what she did just now, she would say that she wouldn't be able to do that again.

Even so—this can be considered a first step.

Shino forced herself to move her weak legs and made herself move away. The icy weight of the model gun was still stuck on her hands and couldn't be shaken off, but after putting her hand under the dry cold wind, her touch finally began to recover. She took out her glasses with her numb fingers and put it on.

She crossed the corridor that linked the west staircase of the school compound and the sports hall, reached the side of the field after walking for a while, passed the sports clubs members who were running and cheering themselves on, through the little woods on the south of the track, and the main gate appeared in front of her.

Students were going back in groups, and just when Shino was about to pass through these people and head through the gate, she felt that something was amiss.

Some female students were standing on the school side of the wall, looking through the school gate, and exchanging words which she did not know.

Shino noticed that there were 2 girls from her class who she had a somewhat good relationship with, and she walked to them.

A girl with long hair and black framed spectacles noticed Shino, smiled and raised her hand.

"Asada-san, are you going home now?"

"Yeah—what are you people doing?"

As she asked that, another girl with chestnut-colored hair that were tied into two braids shrugged, smiled and answered,

"Listen to me. There's a guy at the school gate with a uniform that's not from a nearby school. He parked his bike there and even had two helmets. It seems like he is waiting for a student from our school. It's a little like gossip, but we want to know who was so daring to invite her boyfriend over to the gate to fetch her, right?"

The moment she heard this answer, Shino immediately realized that her face was all white. She checked her watch and was screaming in her heart 'no way'.

He did agree to meet her at the school gate at this time, and that person even said that 'don't waste your bus fare, I'll come over to fetch you'. However, he shouldn't be so aloof so as to park his vehicle in front of the school gate—

...No, that guy would definitely do that.

Shino timidly leaned her body on the fence and peered outside from the school gate. Immediately after that, she felt completely weak. That male student who was wearing a uniform she had never seen before was leaning on a bright little motorbike that had it's tripod down. He was holding two helmets and looking up at the sky in a dazed manner—undoubtedly, he was the boy she had got to know two days ago.

Thinking that she would have to say hello to him and take the back seat of the bike with dozens of people looking at her, Shino couldn't help but blush. She muttered inside her heart 'I really want to log out from here', and squeezed out her last ounce of courage before turning to face her classmates beside her.

"Eh...well...he...he's my friend..."

She said in a soft voice that almost couldn't be heard. The eyes of the bespectacled girl widened.

"Eh...Asada-san's?"

"Wha, what kind of friend?"

The other girl shouted out like this too. Noticing the stares that gathered over because of these sounds, Shino could only hug her bag and shrink back...

"So...sorry!"

Then, she started apologizing and ran away for some reason.

Shino had already went through the green bronze school gate and arrived at the back lane as she heard a voice from behind yell out to her.

"Explain everything clearly to me tomorrow!~"

Even though she arrived beside him, this daring visitor still looked dazed as he looked up at the blue sky.

"Well..."

After talking to him, he blinked and turned his eyes over before showing a lazy smile on his face.

"Ah, good afternoon, Sinon."

Meeting under the bright sun like this again, it felt like Kirito in the real world had a transparency that seemed to have left the ground. His slightly long black hair made his skin look more bright, and the slender body that looked shockingly like a girl's looked similar to his avatar in the virtual world.

This weak feeling, or rather, this feeble presence made Shino remember that he once spent two years in captivity, and caused her to keep her scathing words.

"...Good afternoon...sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's nothing. I just arrived too—speaking of which...why does it feel like..."

At this moment, Kirito finally noticed the students that were watching from near the school gate. He looked around and said,

"...Everyone's looking at us..."

"Pl...please..."

Shino's voice had some reluctance.

"Wouldn't other people notice if you park your bike at someone else's school gate!?"

"I...is that so? Then..."

The boy suddenly gave off a teasing smile. Shino had seen that smile a few times in the virtual world.

"If we continue to stay here, would the disciplinary teacher run over here to make a ruckus? That seems interesting."

"Do...don't kid around!"

In fact, the teachers may really come over. Shino instinctively turned back to look at the school gate and then said softly,

"Hu, hurry up and go!"

"Okay okay..."

Kirito handed the light green helmet that was hanging onto the handle to Shino as he continued to smile.

This guy's inner world messes me up like a mischievous imp, just like how it was like in GGO. I can't be fooled by his appearance—Shino told herself deep inside her heart as she received the safety helmet. She tilted her bag sideways and put on the half helmet. She then stopped as she didn't know how she was to buckle it. At this moment...

"Excuse me a for bit."

Kirito reached his arm over and quickly hooked her helmet up. Shino's face again felt hot as she hurriedly pulled the mask down. She was already starting to wonder how she was going to explain things to everyone the next day.

"...Sinon, well...is your skirt alright?"

"I have sports shorts underneath."

"No, that's not the problem."

"You can't see it from the front seat anyway."

After taking a potshot of revenge, Shino quickly sat down on the back seat of the bike. As she would often take the back seat of her grandpa's Coyote Honda 90, she was used to it.

"Then...you better hold on tight."

Kirito twisted the key, and the rare internal combustion engine let out a loud roar. Shino again shrank her neck back. However, the vibration that reached her waist and the smell of the exhaust gases were truly memorable as she couldn't help but smile. She then wrapped her arms around Kirito's slender body.

It would be a little troublesome for her to head from the Bunkyo area of Yushima to their destination, the central area of Ginza, if she had to take the subway. It would be easier to move around above ground.

They drove from Ochinomizu, to Chiyoda highway before reaching Koukyo. The bike moved slowly around the moat[5] for safety reasons, but luckily, the weather today was fine, and the wind that blew past her face felt rather comfortable. After moving through the major gate, they went through the Uchibori highway then Harumi Avenue, turned left, went through the JR bridge, and then arrived at Ginza Yonchome.

Even though the speed they drove at could be considered a huge difference from riding on the three-wheeler buggy and getting away from Death Gun, they still spent less than 15 minutes to reach the destination. Kirito immediately parked the bike.

Shino was holding the helmet in her hand as she was led by Kirito to a high-class cafe she had never been to before. The moment she pushed the door aside, the waiters in white shirts and black ties bowed deeply to them. Shino couldn't help but panic and looked somewhat embarrassed.

On hearing the waiter ask if it was for two, she felt whether it was like... and panicked even more. However, a voice without restraint was suddenly heard, breaking the entire high-class atmosphere.

"Oi~ Kirito-kun, over here!"

"Ah...we have an appointment with that guy."

As Kirito said that, the waiter indicated that he understood without changing his expression, bowing as he walked forward. The shop was full of rich housewives who were going shopping, and their high school uniforms looked very obvious. Shino could only curl back and gingerly walk on the floor that was polished to an abnormal shine.

A tall and skinny man, who was wearing a high class deep blue western suit, a patterned tie and black-framed spectacles, got up from the table where both of them were headed. Shino heard that he was a civil servant, but besides giving off that white-collar presence, he did look like a scholar too.

As they sat at the table where the man indicated, warm towels and the leather menu appeared in front of them.

"Here, help yourselves."

Shino flipped the menu open as if she was prompted by the guy's voice, and immediately couldn't say anything. Let alone sandwiches and pasta, even the desserts had 4 digit numbers behind them.

Just as Shino was so shocked that she didn't know what to do, beside her, Kirito snorted coldly and said,

"It's better not to be nice with him. We're spending money from our hardworking citizens."

The girl glanced over and found that the bespectacled guy was smiling and nodding too.

"The, then...I'll order this rare cheese cake with cranberry sauce to go along...and also Earl Grey."

Shino ordered these as her heart was going green 'Wow, 2200 yen[6]!'. Unexpectedly, Kirito, who was beside her, said—

"I want baked apple pudding, mont blanc and espresso."

Those unbelievable things were said. Shino couldn't even imagine how much money that would cost.

The attendant bowed and walked away.The bespectacled man reached into his pocket and took out a black business card holder. He took a business card from the holder and then handed the business card to Shino.

"Hello. I'm Kikuoka from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Technology."

He said his name with a steady voice. Shino hurriedly took the business card and bowed back.

"He, hello...I'm Asada...Shino."

The moment she said that, this man called Kikuoka gave an ominous look and said,

"It's because of our carelessness that we caused Asada-san to be in such a dangerous situation. I'm really sorry."

"No...no worries. You're too kind."

As Shino hurriedly lowered her head again, Kirito interrupted from beside her.

"It's better for him to apologize. If Kikuoka-san was able to investigate more thoroughly, we wouldn't have to meet such danger."

"...I'm really sweating now that you mention that."

Kikuoka lowered his head like a kid being lectured, but then lifted his eyes and continued.

"But Kirito-kun, you never expected «Death Gun» to be a group of people, right?"

"That's true..."

After saying that, Kirito leaned on the chair which looked like an antique, which then let out a creaking sound.

"Anyway...tell us what you know up till now first, Kikuoka-san."

"Of course...but it's only been 2 days since we knew of their crimes. It would take some time to explain everything..."

Kikuoka took the coffee cup that was right in front of him, took a sip, and then continued.

"While I said that there was a group, there were actually only 3 members. At least from what the leader Shinkawa Shoichi said, they had three people."

"That guy called Shoichi was the mantle guy who attacked Sinon and me in BoB, right?"

Kikuoka gently nodded his head at Kirito's question.

"I guess that should be right. From the confiscated AmuSphere records we got from his house, we were able to check that he did log into Gun Gale Online at that time."

"House...that guy called Shinkawa Shoichi, what kind of person was he? Was he the mastermind?"

"...To explain all that, we have to start from the SAO incident in year 2022. But before that..."

The waiter just so happened to arrive at this moment as he pushed the trolley with lots of plates of food on it. After waiting for the waiter to arrange these plates onto the table and leave, Kikuoka then gestured Shino not to hold back.

She didn't really have much appetite, but she should still be able to eat it. After saying 'itadakimasu' with Kirito, Shino took the gold fork.

She sliced a bit off the milky white block that was dyed in bright red sauce and placed it inside her mouth. Besides the heavy taste of thick cheese spreading in her mouth, the cake itself melted inside. Surprised, Shino immediately had the thought to ask for the recipe, but thinking about it, she knew that even if she asked the shop, they wouldn't reveal it.

Unknowingly, she ate about half of the cake before putting her fork down and picked up the red teacup. She took a sip of the warm liquid that had a little orange tang in it, and the tense feeling deep inside her was eased.

"It's really nice..."

Shino muttered. On hearing that, Kikuoka happily said,

"Normally, food should accompany happy topics. But it's alright. We can come over another time."

"I, I see..."

Kirito continued to eat the golden brown mont blanc in front of him, and at this point, laughed and dampened Kikuoka's mood.

"I'll advise you not to. This guy's «topics of interest» are either dirty or disgusting."

"That, that's too much. I'm rather confident in my travel experiences in southeast Asia...oh well, let's talk about this first."

Kikuoka took out a tablet PC from his office bag, and then touched the screen with his long fingers.

Shino's body tensed up slightly as she got ready to hear what this person, who looked like a teacher, had to say.

Of course, she wanted to know all about this «Death Gun» incident. However, at the bottom of her heart, there was a slight voice muttering that she didn't want anything more to do with this.

Perhaps a certain part deep within her still trusted Shinkawa Kyouji. Even when that terrifying syringe was placed at her neck, Shino still couldn't hate Kyouji completely, and neither could she give up on all her feelings for him. That person wasn't the real him, something that hacked into his mind caused him to do this—Shino still believed in this saying.

It's been about 40 hours since what happened on Sunday night.

That night—as Shino was prompted by Kirito to go to the bathroom to wash her face and change clothes, the police arrived at her house.

Shinkawa Kyouji, whose head suffered heavy trauma and was vaguely conscious, was immediately arrested and then sent to the hospital by ambulance.

For safety reasons, Shino and Kirito were sent to another hospital and made to take a mandatory checkup. The doctor on duty told Shino that she didn't have anything other than a few bruises. Soon after, the police started their investigations in the hospital, and she tried to clear her mind that was still blurred by a layer of confusion, and told the police exactly what happened inside the room.

She herself didn't notice it, but the doctor diagnosed that her emotional stress level was at its limit, so the police's investigation stopped at about 2am in the morning. Shino then spent the night in the hospital room, and after waking up at 6am, she refused to accept the doctor's proposal to return to her apartment and instead went to school.

Just like that, she groggily went through Monday, which was yesterday. Even though Kyouji continued to skip school, he should still be registered to the school, so Shino thought that the school would know about it. In the end, nobody was talking about it at school.

As Shino ignored Endou and the rest completely and went back to her apartment, the police were already waiting for her at the door. After changing, Shino and the police went to that hospital yesterday, and Shino took a second diagnosis from the doctor. This time, Shino asked a lot of questions about Kyouji, but the police told her that Kyouji was alright, but he kept quiet while being interrogated.

Because of «security reasons», the police wanted Shino to remain in the hospital. After eating her dinner and bathing, she made a short call to her grandparents and mother at her old home before sleeping in the hospital room the hospital had prepared for her. The moment she laid on the bed,

Shino immediately sank into a deep sleep, and her memory was cut off from there. It felt like she had a long dream, but she couldn't remember anything about it at all.

On Tuesday, which was this morning, the policemen again escorted her to her apartment. As she was dropped off, the police told her that her questioning would be over. Even though it was a good thing, how would she know about developments from now on...Shino thought as she got ready for school. Just when she was cutting a tomato for breakfast, her phone suddenly rang. It was from Kirito. The first thing he asked was whether Shino was free after school, and Shino instinctively answered yes.

Just like that, Shino sat beside Kirito and waited for his «associate»—the man who was a civil servant to speak.

Kikuoka turned to look up from the tablet PC and then lowered his volume, probably scared that other people may hear it.

"The General Hospital Director's elder son Shinkawa Shoichi was frail and sick when he was young, and often moved between his house and the hospital ever since he graduated from middle school. He even enrolled in high school a year late...thus, his father had already given up on letting Shoichi take over the family business and pushed this burden onto Kyouji, who was 3 years younger than him. The director then started getting at home tutors for Kyouji and would sometimes even teach him himself, and would leave Shoichi alone. Shoichi wasn't filled with expectations, but his younger brother was forced into despair because of the huge expectations...that's what their father said when he was questioned."

Kikuoka paused at this moment and wet his lips with coffee.

Shino looked at the table surface and tried to imagine how the «parents' expectations» would be like. But no matter what, she just couldn't imagine that happening.

Even though both of them were so close, she had never noticed that Kyouji was under so much pressure. I just kept caring about my own stuff and never actually thought of interacting with others truthfully—as Shino realized this again, her chest felt a sharp pain.

Kikuoka continued,

"—But even in this situation, the brothers were rather close. Once Shoichi dropped out of high school, he turned to the internet as his heaven and started playing MMORPG, and this interest of his affected his brother. After that, the elder brother ended up being a captive of «Sword Art Online» and was in a coma in his father's hospital for 2 years. Once he survived and returned, Kyouji viewed him as some sort of idol...or even treated him like a hero."

At this moment, Shino noticed that Kirito beside her sounded somewhat tense as he breathed. However, Kikuoka's deep and calm voice then continued.

"Once Shoichi survived, he did not mention about what happened in SAO for a while, but after he ended his recuperation and returned home, he started bragging about how he killed many players in that world, how many people were scared of him, this real killer...to Kyouji who wasn't doing well at school and threatened by the upperclassmen, what Shoichi said didn't irritate him, but even made him feel relieved and satisfied."

"Well..."

Shino spoke softly. Kikuoka lifted his head and tilted his neck as if to prompt her to continue.

"These things...were said by Shinkawa-kun, no, Kyouji, right?"

"No, these were based on conclusions made from the older brother's testimony. Shoichi continued to talk during the police investigations, and even had guesses about his younger brother's heart. However, Kyouji was completely different from his brother and remained silent even till now."

"I see..."

Shino really couldn't imagine what kind of plane Kyouji's soul was floating on. She even felt that if she logged into GGO, she could see Spiegel waiting there at the bar where they meet up...even though it's not possible.

"Ah, please continue..."

Kikuoka nodded his head after hearing Shino's words and then again glanced at the tablet PC.

"We have no idea what was the key factor that made the two brothers head down the «road of no return», so we can only guess...but Shoichi

should have started playing Gun Gale Online on Kyouji's suggestion. Shoichi didn't have any phobia about the VR world that many survivors of SAO would have, but he wasn't that enthusiastic when he started playing. He noted that instead of practising his skills by fighting against monsters, he might as well wait on the streets to observe other players and imagine ways of killing them. However, ever since he got the «Invisible mantle» from the RMT system, everything changed."

"RMT..."

Shino couldn't help but say it out. The mantle which Death Gun had, the «Metamaterial Optical Camouflage» ability, should be a really rare item that boss-like monsters would drop at a really low percentage. The price should be much more expensive than the Hecate II.

"Well...I guess that must be really expensive..."

After she said that, Kikuoka nodded his head, and then shook his head with a look of disbelief.

"It's said to be an estimated value of more than 300,000 yen. However, Shoichi would get 500,000 yen[7] in allowance from his father every month."

"That means...that large sniper rifle and the Estoc that was made from the rare material were bought through money...good thing that SAO didn't have a trading area or an RMT..."

As Kirito muttered this, he didn't look like he was joking at all. Also, Kikuoka nodded his head seriously and continued.

"That's true—ever since Shoichi could make himself disappear with that mantle, he had been practising ways to obscure himself from others. At this moment, he merely felt that it was interesting to tail someone from behind...however, on a certain day, he found that the person he was tailing went into the presidential estate to operate a game terminal. Shoichi had an idea and took out his binoculars to try and look at the screen from behind a pillar. And then, he immediately found that person's real name and address and other personal particulars in the real world..."

"In other words...he didn't buy that invisible mantle to obtain information, but the opposite...he had that mantle first before doing such a thing..."

Kirito sighed and then leaned his back on the chair.

"...In the past, any MMO would have some sort of «Hiding» skill, and it's rare to see those who don't have it. But...I feel that the invisibility in VRMMO can be used to do a lot of bad things. At least it should be banned from being used on the streets...you need to feedback this to Zasker, Sinon."

As the topic was suddenly shifted to her, Shino could only hurriedly answer.

"Y, you go submit it...but, that means that the mantle was the reason that gave birth to «Death Gun»."

The last part of those words were obviously said to Kikuoka. The bespectacled civil servant nodded his head and then turned his eyes to look at the tablet PC again. After seeing his kind smile, Shino suddenly had a strange feeling, but that didn't matter now, so Shino didn't say her next thought. Kikuoka continued talking as the sunset shone on the table surface.

"...I guess you can put it like that. Shoichi immediately memorized the personal information on instinct and wrote it down after he logged out. At this moment, he didn't really have some detailed plan to go about with this crime, but being able to get real information on players made him happy. After that, he would spend many hours in the presidential estate and wait for players to appear and write their real addresses down. Finally, he got a total of 16 real player names and addresses. Among them...Asada Shino-san, yours was included."

"..."

Shino nodded. Since it started before September, that would be before the 2nd BoB tournament. There were about 500 players who registered. Even if only half of them inputed their real names and addresses so as to get the model gun, it wouldn't be impossible to steal 16 players' real life information.

Kikuoka continued to explain.

"On a certain day in October, the younger Kyouji indicated to Shoichi that he had a problem with his character development. At that time, he seemed to have said angrily that 'it was because of the fake information «Zekushiido» spread', and Shoichi remembered that he had Zekushiido's real name and address and told it to Kyouji."

That's right. It was likely at that moment that the wall between Kyouji's imagination and the real world started to break apart.

"Shoichi indicated that it wasn't a plan one person came up with."

Kikuoka's calm voice slid into Shino's ears.

"It's said that as the two of them were discussing about how to handle Zekushiido's personal information, the plan to create «Death Gun» started to take shape. However, Shoichi mentioned that they were just joking around in the beginning. Shooting in the game and killing a player in real life...this sounded easy, but there were a few difficulties in reality. After days of discussion, they slowly started to overcome one obstacle after another. And the biggest obstacle they faced was the master key that could break electronic locks and the way to inject drugs..."

"A General Hospital should have a legal master key to open a patient's house when there's an emergency. I guess their father's hospital..."

After hearing it from Kirito, Kikuoka looked like he was blowing a silent whistle as he curled his lips.

"As expected of Kirito. Actually, the government was promoting keyless sensor door locks to add control to personal residences that may not be easy to get broken in...but that's classified information. Anyway, the two of them worked hard to steal the unlock mechanism, the high pressure syringe and Succinylcholine from their father's hospital. According to Shoichi, carrying out this plan itself was like a game. He said that this was completely the same as gathering intel on targets in SAO, preparing their equipment and launching raids. It's said that he even told the police who was taking his statement 'aren't you the same?'. It seemed that he meant that the game was about going about and talking to NPCs everywhere, collecting information, catching the bountied criminal and handing him over to collect money, and that what the police was doing wasn't any different."

"I think that you better not trust his words fully."

The moment Kirito suddenly said these words, Kikuoka frowned and asked,

"Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe that Shoichi may have some part of him which really felt that way, but as «Red-Eyed XaXa», even though he kept telling people around

him that this was just a game, he knew that players will really die and had such an addiction to killing. To him, whether it's the virtual world or the real world, only things that were beneficial to him were real. The sense of reality was wearing thin on him...this may be the dark side of VRMMOs."

"I see. Then...how about your reality?"

Shino thought that Kirito would give a mischievous smile that he would normally give the moment he heard Kikuoka's question. However, he gave an abnormally serious look as he stared up at a certain spot in the air.

"...It's true that I left a part of myself in that world. Right now, my personal worth has decreased."

"Don't you want it back?"

"Please don't ask that, will you? That's my personal privacy."

This time, Kirito really gave a wry laugh, and then glanced at Shino.

"—As for that, what do you think, Sinon?"

"Err..."

Having being asked that all of a sudden, Shino couldn't help but feel somewhat troubled. She turned her thoughts into words, which she wasn't really familiar with, but she still finally tried to express her own thoughts.

"Well...Kirito, what you said just now was different from what you said before."

"Eh...?"

"You once said that 'there wasn't any virtual world'. And said that wherever the person was in was reality. Even though there're many VRMMO games, a gamer won't be divided after going to every world, right? Right now, I'm..."

Shino stretched her right hand out and touched Kirito's left wrist with her fingertip.

"This world is the real world. Even if this is a virtual world that's created from AmuSphere, it's still a real world to me...that's how I think it should be."

Kirito widened his eyes and stared at Shino for a while, which made Shino embarrassed. Then, he showed a smile that didn't have any mischief in it.

"...I see. You're right."

After saying that, Kirito turned to look at Kikuoka and said,

"You better take down what Sinon just said. That may be the one truth in this entire incident."

"—Don't kid around with me."

Shino's right fist tapped Kirito's shoulder gently before turning forward. At this moment, Kikuoka was staring at Shino for some reason, and may have felt awkward as he moved his eyes to his empty cake plate.

"Yes, you're right. And Shoichi's condition—was completely different from Asada-san. It ended up as the place he wasn't at being his reality altogether..."

"That guy continued to repeat the words 'it's not over yet'. Maybe that guy still hasn't completely returned from Aincrad...the aim of this 'created new world' that Akihiko Kayaba created—maybe it can be realized once that floating city completely collapses..."

"Don't say such scary things. His death still has lots of mysteries behind it...but it has nothing to do with this. Let's summarize this...Shoichi had no psychological barrier at the planning stage when he wanted to get into the target's house and inject the drug. At that time, the first victim was «Zekushiido»...Shigemura Tamotsu, and the one who killed him was Shoichi. At around 11pm on the 9th of November, he used the unlocking mechanism to open the target's room and entered it. About 11:30pm, he used the high pressure syringe on Shigemura who wore the AmuSphere as he was taking part in the «MMO Stream» interview, and got injected in the lower jaw. The drug he used was called Suxamethonium Chloride, also known as Succinylcholine, a muscle relaxant, and the victim Shigemura's breathing and heartbeat stopped and died. In other words, the one who shot Zekushiido in GGO was the younger brother Kyouji..."

On hearing Kyouji's name, Shino's shoulders shuddered. On the night two days ago, as Kyouji was all over her, he did mention Zekushiido, and that vengeful voice rang in her ears.

Because of the false information Zekushiido spreaded around that caused a mistake in Kyouji's stat allocation, he wasn't able to get the title of «the strongest»—even though «Yamikaze» was a super AGI-type who was really strong, which would have denied Kyouji's thoughts—but his hatred for Zekushiido was far stronger than the upperclassmen in the real world who tormented and bullied him.

No—I was wrong...at that time, to Kyouji, the real world was already...

"The second victim was Usujio Tarako, and Shoichi was the one who killed him in the real world. The method was almost completely the same. They chose 7 people as targets, and the common condition amongst these targets were that they all lived in Tokyo and have the old-model lock that wouldn't leave any records of being opened, or where there were spare keys near the door..."

"It would have taken quite some time to gather this much information."

After hearing Kirito say that in amazement, Kikuoka's face tensed up and nodded his head.

"It should have taken a lot of time and effort. But—after taking the lives of two, it seemed that nobody believed the legend of «Death Gun»."

"Yeah...everyone just felt that it was just a stupid report—I was one of them."

Shino muttered, and Kikuoka agreed with her view completely.

"Yeah. Kirito-kun and I considered all sorts of possibilities, but in the end, all we could conclude was that 'this was just a rumor'. However, our guess was already wrong..."

"If...if we could have noticed the truth a day earlier, we could have protected the lives of those two players who entered the finals..."

After hearing the anguished words from Kirito, Shino lowered her head and said to him,

"—But you saved me."

"No, I didn't help at all. That was all about your own strength."

Shino glanced at Kirito, and had the thought that she hadn't thanked him properly yet, but at this moment, Kikuoka said again,

"If it wasn't for you two's hard work, the 7 people on the namelist would have been killed by them before the situation got attention, so you two don't have to be so hard on yourselves."

"It's not that...it's just that I'm very unhappy that the ratings of VRMMOs will become worse again."

"These sprouts that were grown by «The Seed» aren't so weak that they'll wilt because of this. Right now, these countless sprouts are gathering to become a towering giant tree that can match the World Tree. Really, I don't know which guy did this!"

"...You know. You better continue talking."

Kirito coughed dryly and prompted Kikuoka to continue.

"Yes...however, I guess you should know what happened next. Both of them found that the threat of Death Gun didn't spread much and felt really angry, and so decided to come up with an even scarier plot. The brothers decided to come up with a killer plot of 3 people in the 3rd tournament to decide the strongest, commonly called the Bullet of Bullets finals. And the players that became their targets were...«Pale Rider», «Garret» and «Sinon»...which is you, Asada-san."

"..."

On hearing that, Shino nodded her head. Shino knew of the 4th casualty, Garret. He was a trendy guy who wielded an old fashioned Winchester rifle. Shino remembered the cowboy cap that could be considered his trademark and prayed for him silently deep inside. At that moment, she suddenly noticed something and said,

"Ah...speaking of which, this may just be a coincidence..."

"What is it?"

"The 7 targets may have a common point. Including me, everyone of them weren't of the AGI-type."

"Oh...? What does that mean...?"

"Shinkawa-kun...no, Kyouji only added his AGI stat, so he was stuck in the game. I guess...he should have some complicated feelings towards other types...like those who stack up on STR."

"Hmm..."

Kikuoka immediately couldn't say anything and could only look at the screen of the tablet PC.

"What you meant is that...his motive was always from the game...now the prosecutors will have some difficulties cross-checking him...but will it really become like this..."

Kikuoka seemed to be in disbelief as he continued to shake his head. At this moment, Kirito lamented,

"No...I feel that it's really possible. To MMO players, the character stats are absolute values. I know of some people who were in a joking mood as they nudged their friends hands while they were adjusting their stats, causing their friends to accidentally add an extra point, and then both of them would quarrel and start killing each other in the game over it for months...of course, these were all in games."

Shino could also understand why such a thing happened. However, Kikuoka merely widened his eyes and then shook his head.

"Looks like the prosecutors, lawyers, judges and attorneys need to have some experience of diving into VRMMOs. No—it's about time we set some laws related to them...hmm, but that's not what we have to worry about. Err...where were we?"

He glanced at the tablet PC and then nodded his head.

"That's right, we talked about how they chose 3 people as targets. However—unlike the last two killings, there was a huge problem with the execution of the plan in the BoB finals. As «Death Gun» in the game and the person outside the game couldn't contact each other, it would be difficult for both parties to shoot at the same time. Finally, this problem was barely solved with the live telecast from outside the game, but..."

"It's still difficult to execute it, right? And there's movement."

Kirito interrupted with a scowl on his face and continued,

"I missed this and thought that there were only 2 Death Guns..."

"I, I see. They seemed to have chosen a trio nearest to their house...like how Pale Rider lived in Omori, Ota, and Garret was living in Kawasaki, Musashi Kosugi, which weren't too far away. But the Bunkyo, Yushima

area Asada-san lived in was rather far. Also, Kyouji, who always wanted to be Death Gun, was insistent on being the one killing in the real world. Shoichi had a bike, but Kyouji didn't have a license—so Shoichi invited a new partner into the plan. Yes...that person's name is called Kanemoto Atsushi, 19 years old now, an old acquaintance of Shoichi—or rather..."

Kikuoka glanced at Kirito.

"His guild partner during SAO. His character name was...«Johnny Black» Have you heard of..."

"Yes."

Kirito looked down and nodded his head.

"He was XaXa's partner in «Laughing Coffin», a player who used a poison dagger. At that time, both of them attacked a few players and killed them...damn it...if I had known...I should have..."

Before he could say it, Shino quickly reached her right hand out to grab Kirito's left hand. At the same time, she looked into Kirito's eyes and slowly shook her head.

Kirito immediately knew what she meant.

Kirito immediately looked like a baby who was crying and smiling, showing that he knew, but that expression immediately disappeared and became that usual poker face. At this moment, Shino moved her fingers away from his icy hand and turned forward. Kikuoka, who had been staring at them from the opposite side, continued with his explanation.

"...There was no mention of whether this Johnny Black—also known as Kanemoto—was involved in this plan in Shoichi's testimony. To Shoichi, Kanemoto seemed to be a person who's really hard to understand at times..."

"Why don't you just ask that Kanemoto?"

Kirito's reply was as simple as ever, but Kikuoka shook his head.

"We haven't caught him yet."

"Eh..."

"Shinkawa Kyouji was arrested in Asada-san's apartment, and 40 minutes later, his brother Shoichi was arrested in his own house. Then, the police

followed Shoichi's testimony and arrived at the apartment in Ota where Kanemoto was at, but there was no one inside the room. That apartment is still under surveillance, but there's still no news that we caught Kanemoto yet."

"...Can we confirm that he was the one who killed «Pale Rider» and «Garret» in the finals?"

"I guess it should be him. Shoichi did mention that he handed the same drug syringes to him and Kyouji. We didn't find those weapons, but we found hair that matched Kanemoto's DNA in the victims houses."

"Syringes..."

Shino couldn't help but feel a chill after thinking of the name that made her remember about this term that would remind her of the drug name. Kyouji's voice 'this is the real Death Gun' when he placed the syringe at her neck continued to echo in her mind.

Kirito seemed to have the same thoughts as Shino as he looked and said,

"Were the drug's use finished after killing the other two targets?"

But Kikuoka shook his head to deny this.

"No...a small syringe of Succinylcholine would be fatal enough, but for added security, Shoichi gave him three drug syringes, so he may still have one left. That was why the police insisted on protecting you people until morning from Monday on, especially Asada-san who may still be in danger."

"...You're saying that Johnny Black may continue to hurt Sinon...?"

"No, that's just for added precaution. The police felt that it wasn't necessary too. As their Death Gun plot collapsed, there wouldn't be any benefit to attack Asada-san. Besides, Kanemoto and Asada-san had no reasons to harm each other or personal grudge. Right now, the automatic identification camera network in the center of Tokyo had started its trial, so I guess he won't be able to run away for long."

"What's that...?"

"It's commonly called the S2 system. The computer will automatically analyze the faces of all the people the camera sees and then look for the fugitive...well, the details are classified."

"That's really amazing."

Kirito frowned as he took a sip of coffee.

"I have the same feeling too. Anyway, I think it's just a matter of time before Kanemoto's arrested. Let's get back to the incident and summarize this..."

Kikuoka's fingers moved on the tablet PC, and then shrugged, lifted his head and said,

"You should be more familiar with the rest than I do. Shinkawa Kyouji immediately came to Asada-san's house to attack after the tournament was over, but luckily, he was arrested without achieving his goal. Shinkawa Shoichi was then arrested next, and the remaining Kanamoto Atsushi is being wanted. The brothers are still being interrogated in the Fuji branch. Sorry for taking such a long time...but my report ends here. That's all the information I have now...do you have any questions?"

"Well..."

She felt that this may be a question that couldn't be answered, but Shino couldn't help but ask,

"Shinkawa-kun...Kyouji, what will happen to him from now on...?"

"Mu..."

Kikuoka pushed his spectacles up with his fingers and bemused.

"Shoichi's currently 19, and Kyouji's 16, so they will be tried under the juvenile laws....but this case is a huge one that involves 4 lives, so the juvenile court would probably send the case back to the prosecutor. Also, they probably need a psychiatric evaluation. Even though we have to wait for it to end...but looking at their actions, I think there should be a high chance that they would be sent into a juvenile jail. That's because those two have lost their sense of reality..."

"No...I don't think they lost their sense of reality yet."

After hearing Shino mutter this, Kikuoka blinked and indicated with his eyes for her to continue on.

"I don't really understand the older brother...but Kyouji...to Kyouji, Gun Gale Online's the real world to him, which was why he decided—"

She raised her right hand, pointed her finger straight, and then placed it down again.

"To abandon everything in this world and head to that real world called GGO. Maybe people in this world...would feel that he was just running away, but..."

Shinkawa Kyouji was the one who wanted to take Shino's life away. The fear and despair he gave Shino was unmeasurable. But even so, Shino still couldn't begrudge him and felt reluctant. This painful feeling caused Shino to continue to say,

"But I guess this online gaming wouldn't just be a game of entertainment to us once our minds and time were spent to a certain level. Earning experience and money to become stronger is really a troublesome and difficult thing. Of course, it's nice to play with friends occasionally...but there's a lot of pressure to continue playing like they're working just to be the strongest, like what Kyouji did."

"Stress...caused by playing games? But...wouldn't that be the complete opposite of its purpose..."

Kikuoka said in surprise, and Shino nodded at him and continued.

"Yes. Kyouji...reversed this world with that world."

"But...why? Why was he so willing to sacrifice so much to get this so-called title of being the strongest...?"

"I'm not too sure about that...I just said it before, to me, this world and the game are all connected...Kirito, do you know why....?"

Shino looked right, and found that Kirito was leaning his back on the chair, closing his eyes and thinking. Soon, he opened his mouth and muttered.

"Because you wanted to be strong."

Shino closed her lips, thought about this short sentence, and then nodded her head slowly.

"...That's right. I was the same the last time. Maybe every VRMMO player is the same...just trying to be stronger..."

Shino turned her body around and faced Kikuoka from the front.

"Then...when are visitors allowed to meet Kyouji?"

"Well...he'll probably be kept in custody after we cross-examine him. We have to wait until he's sent to a juvenile observation center."

"I see—I'll go see him. Once I see him, I want to tell him what I was thinking before...and what I'm thinking now."

No matter how late, no matter how much he didn't want to listen to her, Shino felt that she had to do this. This time, Kikuoka finally showed what looked like a whole-hearted smile.

"You're really a strong person. Yes, please do. I'll make arrangements to his management plan in the future and send an email to you."

He then looked at the watch on his left wrist and said,

"Sorry—it's about time for me to leave. I can be said to lack leisure, but there're really lots of things to handle."

"Sure. Sorry for troubling you."

Shino also thanked him after Kirito.

"Well..thank you."

"No need to be so kind. It was my negligence that caused both of you to be in danger, so this should be what I should do. I'll notify you if I get some new information."

Kikuoka placed the tablet PC into the office bag beside him and stood up from the chair. Just when he was about to reach for the bill on the table—he suddenly stopped.

"Oh yes, Kirito-kun..."

"...What is it?"

"This is what you wanted me to get."

He took a small piece of paper from the inside pocket of his western suit and handed it to Kirito.

"Death Gun...no, Red-eyed XaXa—Shinkawa Shoichi, once he heard that this was the question you raised, he answered it without hesitation. However, he asked us to send a message back to you. Of course, you don't have to care about him at all, and any messages from a suspect can't

be revealed in an investigation, so the police appeared to have refused his request...so, do you want to hear it?"

Kirito's face looked like he just drank some really bitter coffee, but he still nodded his head in the end.

"Since you brought it here, I'll listen."

"Then...muu..."

Kikuoka took out the second piece of paper, saw the contents, and read,

"...'This isn't over. You don't have the power to end everything. You'll soon notice. It's showtime.' just like that—"

"...Such a slippery guy."

It's been about 10 minutes after Kikuoka smiled as he waved his hand and left.

As both of them left the cafe and headed for where the bike was parked, Kirito suddenly grumbled.

"...Who is that guy? He called himself an officer of Internal Affairs Ministry...but somehow..."

Shino thought that he was really an enigmatic person and said this to Kirito. However, Kirito merely shrugged his shoulders and answered,

"Well, I can be certain that he's under the VR world Management sector. At least for now."

"Now?"

"Think about it. Things just happened less than 2 days ago. Don't you feel that he knew too much about what's going on inside the police force? The Japanese jurisdiction departments would never get involved in each other's department, so that shouldn't be common."

"...What do you mean?"

"He originally said that he wasn't really in a single unit, like the police or something...it's not really possible, but he..."

"...?"

"I once met him here before and followed him when he went back."

Shino gave a look of disbelief as she watched Kirito walk beside her. However, the boy just looked like nothing happened and continued.

"In the end, there were 3 large sedans waiting at a nearby underground car park, and the driver sure didn't look like someone you want to mess with when he has short hair and a black suit. I tried my best to follow them with my bike, but maybe I was discovered...Kikuoka was dropped off in front of Ichigaya station, and he disappeared while I was looking for a parking spot."

"Ichigaya? Not Kasumigaseki?"

"Yeah. The Internal Affairs Ministry's in Kasumigaseki...but what's in Ichigaya should be...the Ministry of Defense."

"Min..."

Shino immediately couldn't say anything and could only continue blinking.

"This means that...he's from the self defence force?"

"So I said it wasn't really possible. The police's relationship with the defence ministry should be worse than that of the internal affairs department."

Kirito shrugged slightly. At this moment, Shino finally thought of something.

"Ah...speaking of which, Kikuoka-san was wearing...I guess, spectacles with very small degree or no degree, because the lens didn't really reflect much."

"Is that so...I see."

Shino looked at the boy who seemed to understand and then said,

"But...even if that person has some relationship with the defence ministry, why must he investigate VRMMOs? They shouldn't have any relationship with each other right?"

"Well...I heard that someone intended to use FullDive technology to train soldiers, even though that's the situation with the US Army."

"Wha, what?"

This time, it was Shino who was shocked and stopped. Kirito then stopped and shook his right hand.

"Like for example...hm...can we talk about guns?"

"Y, yeah...it's alright if it's just listening."

"Good. For example, if I give you a real sniper rifle, can you successfully finish the loading until the firing?"

"..."

Shino recalled how she shot the can with the Government model gun a few hours ago and nodded her head.

"I guess so...if it's just firing. But in the real world, I don't know how to lower the recoil, so I may not be able to hit the target."

"But I don't even know how to load bullets. If we can train weapon and basic operations in the virtual world, we may be able to save a lot of ammunition and fuel."

"Rea...really..."

Shino couldn't help but look at her right hand. The scale Kirito was talking about was way too big, and it was really hard to imagine such a situation.

"Of course, this is just a possibility. Just this year alone, we have no idea for how many purposes FullDive technology can be used for, so it won't be strange to see whatever new thing that happens in the future. Anyway—better be more careful about that guy."

After saying that casually, Kirito walked over to the bike and took off the clamp on its back wheel. As he handed a helmet over to Shino, he said with a rare hesitating attitude to her,

"Well..."

"...? What is it?"

"...Sinon, do you have some time after this...?"

"I don't really have anything to do. Maybe I won't want to log into GGO for a while."

"I see—sorry, I have something I want to ask you to help out with..."

"What is it?"

"The image of that cave during the BoB finals were seen by...those SAO-era friends of mine. And they knew that I was that «Kirito»...well...if you can help me explain to my friends that we weren't flirting, I'll be really happy."

"...Heh."

Shino started feeling that it was interesting and gave a smile. Even though she felt very embarrassed about that, after hearing this boy who would do things at his own whims say that he's bothered about being suspected of having an affair with her, she had a 'now what are you going to do' thought.

"But even if they're your old friends, it's amazing that they could recognize you from your name."

"Yeah...they recognized my sword skills."

"I, I see—it's alright to help you out, but you owe me one. You're treating me to cake next time."

After hearing her say that, Kirito gave a sheepish look and said,

"Are...are we going back to that earlier shop again...?"

"I won't do such a cruel thing."

"That's great. Then...please follow me to Ochinomizu for a while. It won't take you much time."

"What, isn't that just beside Yushima? That's on the way home."

She received the helmet and put it on her head. After Kirito buckled it for her, Shino couldn't help but think 'I should have learnt how to put on a helmet in GGO to save myself trouble'.

After moving up Ginza highway to Showa highway and moving north for a while, they arrived at the redevelopment around the east side of Akihabara station. They went past the silver skyscrapers that looked like the streets of Gurokken and entered near Okachimachi. The surroundings had a heavy old town like atmosphere.

The motorbike turned around the alleys like an old bull dragging a cart, and they finally stopped at a small shop.

Shino got off her seat, took off her helmet and looked up. This black glowing wooden building gave a chilly feeling, and only the metal signboards that were formed by two dices on the door incidated to her that it was a cafe. Looking down, the words «Dicey Cafe» was carved in, which should be the shop's name. The sign hanging on the icy cold door was flipped to the «closed» side.

"...Over here?"

"Yeah."

Kirito nodded and took out his bike keys before pushing the door without hesitation. The slow-tempo music of jazz accompanied a quick 'Clink' as the door was opened.

Shino entered the shop like she was attracted by the fragrance of coffee. Under the orange light, the wooden boards were glowing too. The entire space was small, but it had an unspeakable warmth. This made Shino's tense shoulders relax.

"Welcome..."

Upon entering the shop, a clear baritone came immediately. Looking around, Shino spotted a large man with chocolate-colored skin standing behind the bar. That face of an old war veteran looked intimidating, but that white shirt and little butterfly knot bow tie on the collar gave an amusing feeling to that.

There were already two customers who were in the shop. On the round chairs in front of the bar counter, there were two girls wearing school uniforms. Shino noticed that their uniforms were the same color as Kirito's.

"You're too slow!"

One of them, a girl with shoulder-length hair curling inwards jumped up from the round seat and exclaimed that to Kirito.

"Sorry, sorry, Chrysheight spoke too much."

"I ate 2 apple pies while waiting for you. Kirito! It'll be your fault if I grow fat!"

"Why, why is it my fault now...?"

The other girl with slight brown straight hair, down to the middle of her back, merely laughed as she heard their conversation at the beginning, but soon after, she got off the bench and interrupted with a tone that seemed to show that she was rather used to this situation.

"Hurry up and introduce us, Kirito-kun."

"Ah...you're right."

After Kirito nudged her on the back, Shino arrived at the center of the shop. She tried her best to suppress the fear she would have when meeting someone for the first time and nodded at them.

"This is the 3rd winner of Gun Gale Online, Sinon, real name, Asada Shino."

"Do, don't say that."

Shino protested slightly after hearing this unexpected introduction from Kirito, but Kirito merely chuckled and continued. He pointed at the energetic girl he was quarreling with and said,

"This is the cheating blacksmith Lisbeth, real name is Shinozaki Rika."

"You bastard..."

The girl called Rika immediately gave a bad look and attacked Kirito. He dodged and raised his left hand towards the other girl.

"And this is the berserk healer Asuna, real name Yuuki Asuna."

"Tha, that's too much!"

Asuna protested, but her face was still smiling. She then stared at Shino with clear beautiful eyes and then nodded at her.

"And that..."

Kirito finally pointed his jaw at the shopkeeper inside the bar.

"That's Iron Wall Agil."

"Oi oi, am I an Iron Wall now? My mom gave me a nice name, okay?"

What's shocking was that it seemed that even the shopkeeper here was a VRMMO player. The giant laughed and placed his right hand on his sturdy chest and said,

"Hello. I'm called Andrew Gilbert Mills. I hope we can get along."

As what he said was all in fluent Japanese except for his name which was in English, Shino couldn't help but blink a few times and hurriedly lowered her head to greet him.

"Let's sit down and talk first."

There were two 4-seater tables in the shop. Kirito walked towards one and pulled the chair out. After waiting for Shino, Asuna and Rika to sit down, he flicked a finger at the shopkeeper.

"Agil, I want ginger ale. What do you want, Sinon?"

"Ah...the same then."

"The ginger ale here's really spicy."

Kirito chuckled and said 'two glasses' towards the counter, and then cupped his hands on the table.

"Then, I'm going to explain to Lisbeth and Asuna what happened last weekend."

Even though Kirito and Shino had already collated what happened during the BoB finals with what Kikuoka said, it took them more than 10 minutes to explain everything to others.

"So—as things aren't revealed on the media yet, the real names and detailed information couldn't be revealed, but that's basically it."

After concluding things, Kirito looked somewhat tired as he laid his tired body on the chair and finished the second cup of ginger ale.

"…You, for some reason...you really get into lots of trouble."

Rika shook her head and sighed as she commented. However, Kirito looked down and shook his head.

"No…Well, I can't really say this. This incident did involve me after all."

"…Is that so—ahhh, I knew I should have been there. I have a whole lot of things I want to say to that Death Gun."

"That guy's not that only one who got his soul twisted by SAO. There's likely lots of them."

At this moment, Asuna smiled to chase away the current moody atmosphere.

"But I feel that a lot of souls were saved, like mine. Of course, I don't mean that I agree with SAO…the guild leader's actions…because of that a lot of people died…but even so, I won't deny these two years I lived, and I won't regret about them at all."

"…Ahh, you're right. During the last battle with Death Gun, if it wasn't for Asuna holding my hand, I wouldn't be able to use that move. I guess…it's because of those two years in SAO…that your warmth reached me…"

Of course, Shino couldn't understand what Kirito meant by that. The boy found that she seemed to be puzzled and smiled in an embarrassed manner before explaining.

"Didn't I say that I dived in from the hospital in Ochinomizu during the night of the finals? I never told anyone about that place, and Asuna tortured and interrogated Kikuoka before he spilled it out."

"Y, you don't have to say it like that!"

After Asuna said that, she puffed her cheeks angrily. Then, Kirito gave a mischievous smile and said,

"And then, she dived in from this shop, but after knowing the location, came rushing over to that hospital I was at. At that moment…I was fighting with Death Gun, and she grabbed my hand tightly. And unbelievably…I did feel Asuna's warmth at that moment. It's thanks to her that I drew that FiveSeven handgun I had forgotten about."

"…I see…"

Shino nodded her head silently. Though she was thinking whether the two of them were dating, she immediately threw that imagination aside. Luckily, Kirito didn't notice this abnormal situation and slowly continued.

"But that wasn't all. After the tournament ended, I logged out, and Asuna told me…that the log in name «Sterben» Death Gun used was actually German, and it should be read as that. It meant «Death». But this was a name that only doctors and nurses would use in Japan, and so…I remembered that you told me that you have a friend who's a doctor's kid, and you were about to call him to your house, so I had a bad feeling. Once

I found out that it would be too late once the police arrived, I rode my bike to Yushima…but I didn't really help out much…"

These words shook Shino in a certain silent way.

"…Sterben. Not Steven…"

She muttered, closed her eyes, thought and said,

"…Hospital's term, it means death…why did he choose such a name…?"

"Maybe he wanted to rebel against his dad who was a doctor. Anyway—it's not a reason we can easily think of."

Kirito sighed. Sitting diagonally opposite him, right in front of Shino was Asuna, who said with an optimistic tone,

"It's better not to think too much into the meaning of a VRMMO character name. Once you find out certain truths, you'll lose even more."

Beside her, Rika immediately chuckled and answered,

"Oh~, as expected of someone who used her real name as the character name, it's really convincing!"

"Hey!"

Asuna immediately attacked with her right elbow, and Rika pretended to look in pain. Shino inadvertently smiled as she watched their interactions with each other, and at this moment, Asuna suddenly looked at her. The shiny tea-colored eyes were glowing with brightness, and Shino felt strength in that humbleness.

"Well…Asada-san…"

"Wha, what is it?"

"These words may not be suited for me to say this, but…I'm sorry, for letting you see such a terrifying thing."

"No…don't say that…"

Shino hurriedly shook her head and said each word out one by one.

"This incident may be caused by me. Because of my personality, play style…my past and other things. Anyway, during the tournament, I

panicked…luckily, Kirito made me calm down. Well, what was telecasted was that he was comforting Sinon…"

And then, Kirito jumped up immediately and spilled out words in rapid fire.

"Tha, that's right. I almost forgot about the most important thing. It was an emergency, we were being chased down by that killer in that situation. Don't think too much into it!"

"…Alright then, we'll trust you for now. But we don't know what will happen in the future…."

Rika continued to mutter as she stared at Kirito, but still clapped and showed her lively smile.

"But I'm happy to know a female VRMMO player in the real world."

"That's right. I still have a lot of things I want to ask about GGO. Please be friends with me, Asada-san."

Asuna gave a steady smile before stretching her right hand out on the table. After seeing that white and tender hand—

Shino couldn't help but feel somewhat intimidated.

Friends. As the word entered her heart, she felt a burning sense of yearning, but also a sharp pain and anxiety.

Friends. Ever since that incident, she had yearned for them many times, but got betrayed just as many times, until she finally told her heart that she should not wish for such luxury.

I want to be friends with her. To hold the loving hands of this girl called Asuna, to embrace her warmth. I want to go out and play with her, to talk with her, to do what normal girls would do.

But in that situation, it would be a matter of time before she knew that Shino killed before, that her hands were stained with blood.

She was scared that Asuna would give her an irritated expression. To touch humans—such a simple act would likely be something that would be eternally denied to her.

She thought that she should just head back like that, that the mere words of 'being friends with her' would be enough to warm her heart for a while. As she got ready to apologize—

"Sinon…"

This little muttering made Shino waver because of her shrinking consciousness. Her body jerked, and she then looked at Kirito beside her.

As they exchanged looks, Kirito nodded his head slightly but firmly. His eyes were telling Shino that it was alright. Thus, Shino turned her eyes back to Asuna as if she was hypnotized.

The girl was still smiling, and her right hand was still shown in front for Shino.

Shino's arm felt as heavy as a lead block. However, she was starting to fight against this shackle as she slowly, slowly lifted her arm. Compared to isolating herself because she didn't want to doubt others or was scared of being betrayed, she would rather trust others and be hurt by them. That was the first time Shino had this thought ever since that incident.

It felt like Asuna's hand was far away. As the distance was closed in, the density of the air increased, feeling like there was a wall to bounce Shino's hand back.

However, her fingers finally touched the other party's.

The next moment, Shino's right hand was tightly cupped by Asuna's hand.

That warmth really couldn't be described with words. The warmth that was passed over started moving from the fingertips and up the arms, shoulders and the entire body before finally melting Shino's frozen blood.

"Ah…"

Shino subconsciously exhaled. To think that it would be that warm. She had long forgotten about something—a human hand's touch can move the soul. At this moment, Shino felt that this was reality. She realized heavily that all the fear she used to have, how she continued to run away from this world, she was finally tied to this real reality now.

Just like that, a few seconds passed, no, numerous seconds…

At this moment, Shino noticed that the smiling Asuna showed some hesitation on her lips. As she instinctively tried to draw her hand back, Asuna held on with even more force. At this moment, Asuna seemed like she was choosing her words wisely as she slowly said to the bewildered Shino.

"…Well, Asada-san…Shino-san. There's another reason why we invited you here today. This may not make you comfortable…and it may make you angry. But, we, we have to…tell you no matter what…"

"Reason…? Me, angry…?"

She was losing grasp of the situation. But at this moment, Kirito, who was sitting on the left, said with a nervous voice,

"Sinon, well, I have to apologize to you first."

After that, the boy bowed his head down in apology. Then he used the pitch black eyes that were in the midst of that slightly long bangs and that girlish-avatar look to stare at Shino.

"…I told Asuna and Lisbeth what happened to you before. That's because I needed their help."

"Eh…?"

As Shino heard that Kirito told the truth to them, she couldn't hear what happened next.

—They knew what happened at the post office? Asuna and Rika knew what the 11-year-old Shino did?

This time, Shino did use all her strength to try and pull her hand away from Asuna.

But she didn't succeed. This delicate girl called Asuna was holding Shino' right hand with an unknown strength. The girl's eyes, expression and the warmth she was passing through to her seemed like she wanted to say something to Shino. But—what? What did she want to say? Was there anything to say to me even after knowing that my hands were dyed in blood?

"Shino…actually, I, Lisbeth and Kirito all took leave on Monday from school, and went to the …city."

"——!!"

At this moment, shock wouldn't be enough to describe Shino's emotion. During these few seconds, she could not understand what Asuna meant.

The girl's ample and glossy looking lips said a location. And that was the city where Shino stayed in until she graduated from middle school, the

place where that incident happened, the place where she really wanted to forget and didn't want to go back.

Why, why, why?

Shino could only feel this question spin in her head. Finally, she asked,

"Why…must you do such a thing…?"

She continued to shake her head and moved to stand up as she hurriedly tried to get away from here.

But just before Shino stood up, Kirito's hand was pressing down on her left shoulder. At this moment, his nervous voice entered Shino's ears.

"That's because you never met the people you should have met, Sinon…and you didn't hear the words you needed to hear. I thought that you would be hurt…but I, I just couldn't sit by and let this go. So I used the database of the press to investigate that incident…I thought that it wouldn't be clear to say it on the phone, so I went to the post office where that incident happened, and asked them to tell me how to contact that person."

"People…I should meet…? Words I should hear…?"

Shino could only repeat the words blankly, and sitting beside her, Rika shot Kirito a look, got up and went deep into the shop. As the door with the plate PRIVATE was opened, a person appeared.

It was a woman in her thirties. She had shoulder-length hair with slight make-up on. She was also dressed in a rather mature manner. She was more like a housewife than an office lady.

And then, a set of footsteps proved that Shino's impression was correct. A little girl who looked like she hadn't entered primary school yet came running out. They looked really similar, and they're most likely mother and daughter.

But even after seeing these two people, Shino merely felt puzzled. She did not know who this mother and daughter pair was. She had never met them in her hometown before, let alone Tokyo.

As the woman saw Shino standing there in a dazed manner, she looked sad yet happy for some reason, and then bowed deeply at Shino. The girl beside her bowed too.

After maintaining that for a while, Rika prompted them to move to the table in front of Shino. Asuna got up to let the lady sit in front of Shino, and the little girl sat beside her mother. At this moment, the shopkeeper who continued to remain silent walked out silently from the bar, served a cup of café au lait in front of the mother and milk in front of the girl before heading back.

Even at such a close distance, Shino still didn't know who they were. Why did Kirito say that this woman should be someone 'I should meet'? Was he mistaken or something…?

——No

No, it felt like…deep in a certain part of her memory, a spark was suddenly created. She didn't know them, so why—

At this moment, the woman again bowed deeply at Shino and said her name with a slightly trembling voice.

"Nice to meet you. You should be Asada…Shino-san, right? My name is Oosawa Sachie. This girl is called Mizue, and she's four years old."

As expected, she had no impression of those two names at all. Speaking of which, Shino herself wouldn't have any relation with a mother and daughter of this age, but her memory continued to hurt.

Shino couldn't even greet them as she widened her eyes while sitting on the chair. The mother called Sachie took a deep breath and said with a clear voice,

"…I moved to Tokyo after giving birth to this child. In the past, I used to work in the …city, and the location where I worked was…"

The moment she heard the next few words, Shino understood everything.

"…The Post Office at Third Street."

"Ah…"

Shino let out a soft voice from her mouth. That small and ordinary post office—was where that incident took place. Five years ago, Shino and her mother went there, and she had the incident that caused the biggest change in her life.

The criminal with the gun killed the man at the window, and then looked like he did not know whether to shoot the two female workers at the counter or Shino's mother. However, Shino lost control of herself and rushed at the man, snatched the gun—and squeezed the trigger.

That's right…this mother called Sachie was undoubtedly one of the female workers she met at the post office.

In other words…Kirito deliberately went with Asuna and Rika to that post office, got the address of the female worker who resigned and moved to Tokyo, and after establishing contact with her, invited her to come over to meet Shino today.

Shino could roughly get the gist of things, but there was still a greatest question within her.

Why? Why did Kirito do such a thing even if he had to take leave?

"…I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, Shino-san."

Sachie, who was sitting in front of Shino, teared up as she said that.

Shino didn't understand why she apologized at all and could only remain in her seat blankly. And the other party continued with a trembling voice.

"I'm really sorry. I…should have met you earlier…but I really wanted to forget about that incident…so I came to Tokyo while using the fact that my husband was posted out…I could have thought it through and understand that you felt really hurt…but I didn't even thank you or even apologize to you…"

The tears in her eyes flowed out cascading down her face. That braided-hair girl beside her called Mizue seemed to be worried for her own mother as she looked up. Sachie silently patted the girl's head.

"…During that incident. Th, this girl was still in my stomach. So Shino-san, you didn't just save me back then…you saved this child too. Really…really, thank you very much, thank you very much…"

"…I saved…your lives?"

Shino merely repeated those words.

In that post office, Shino, who was only 11 years old, squeezed the trigger 3 times and took a person's life. That was what Shino did, and what she always thought. However—this woman in front of her clearly said.

That she was saved by Shino.

"Sinon."

Beside her, Kirito said with a trembling voice,

"Sinon, you had been blaming yourself all this while, punishing yourself. I can't say that what you did is wrong, but—you also have the right to think of those you saved. In that case, you'll find that you have the right, to forgive yourself. That's what…I wanted to tell you…"

Then, Kirito seemed like he didn't know what else to say anymore and could only bite his lower lip.

Looking away from the boy, Shino looked at Sachie again. She knew that she had to say something, but she just couldn't say anything. She couldn't even talk, or even think of anything for that matter…

To-on.

At this moment, a sound of light footsteps could be heard.

That 4-year-old girl called Mizue jumped off her chair and ran around the table to Shino in small steps. Sachie should be the one who tied her hair which looked so silky and smooth. Her round face was showing a cute pink, and her large eyes were showing the purest and most innocent glow in this world.

Mizue should be wearing a kindergarten uniform as she had a little bag on her back. She reached her hands into her bag and took out something.

It was a drawing paper that was folded into a rectangular shape. She opened the paper clumsily and passed it to Shino.

The picture that was drawn with crayons immediately entered Shino's eyes. At the center of the picture was a woman's face with long hair. That smiling face should belong to her mother—Sachie. And the braided girl on the right side should be herself. The bespectacled person on the left was her father.

At the top of the picture, there were the words «Shi-no-o-ne-e-san-he» (To Shino onee-san) that were written in hiragana, probably just learnt in school.

Mizue handed over the picture with both hands, and Shino received it with both hands as well. Mizue smiled and took a deep breath.

It seemed that the girl practiced it many times before as she said each word one by one with an innocent and tender voice.

"Shino onee-san, thank you for saving mama and Mizue."

At this moment, Shino's eyes were covered—with the colors of the rainbow, and then, it was all jumbled up.

After a while, she found herself crying. Before today, she did not know that such warmth, clarity and tears that could wash any stain away existed.

Shino continued to cry as her hands continued to hold that piece of large picture.

A small hand that was so tender felt somewhat timid right from the beginning, but then grabbed her right hand tightly.

And what was held was the black spot, where the firepowder remained on her right hand—

To accept all my past would likely take some time. Even so, I like this current world now.

My life will have many pains from today onwards, and the path in front of me will have lots of thorns.

But I believe that I can continue to walk on.

Because my right hand that's being held and the tears on my face are so warm.

(END)

Author's Notes

I am Kawahara Reki, and this is the final volume in year 2010, «Sword Art Online 6, Phantom Bullet».

Ever since February '09, this series SAO and the other 'Accel World' series were released in alternating months, and 12 volumes were published. However, the reason why this seemingly impossible task could be completed was because «the SAO series had its original script in the first place». I thought that I just needed to edit the web publishing a little bit and that there wouldn't be too much work.

But after reading through my original script, I found that there were parts that couldn't be edited slightly, but modified heavily…however, volumes 1 and 2 were still «edited», 3 and 4 were «added on», 5 was more like a «rewrite»…but 6 was already «an original script» (laughs). Also, the number of pages in this volume exceeded every single previous volume…now that I can successfully (or unsuccessfully) write my afterwords, even I felt that it was a miracle. So to warn myself, I have to shout—WHY! DID! THINGS! END! UP! LIKE! THIS!

Well, I spent so much effort with unknown meaning to complete a volume, but I'm glad if this can allow me to understand my new friends through single volume releases and that my old friends who I know on the web version can feel refreshed by reading the main works. The next volume's slate to be on Asuna who we waited for a long time. She's the main heroine but almost didn't have a chance to appear in volumes 5 and 6. She'll be extremely active in the next volume, so everyone, please look forward to it! (It won't become a rewrite, most likely…)

And then now, for the final apologies today…

I guess a few readers knew about it, but during the «Dengeki Bunko Autumn Festival 2010» which was in October at Akihabara, abec-san, who's in charge of the illustrations, and I were supposed to be attending the autograph session. Yes…I was late! And really late! We ended up being late by 30 minutes! The reason was that my brain data was damaged and viewed the time «12:30pm» as «2:30pm»!

…It's said that during the 4,000 year history of Dengeki Bunko, I was the first author to delay the autograph session because I was late…to the readers who registered to take part in the autograph session and waited

for a long time, I really don't know how to apologize to you…I'm really sorry, I won't do this again. (But it feels like they won't let me do another autograph session again!)

In the end, because of how I was late and that the late submission of the script, I caused a lot of problems to the editor Miki-san, but I would like to say to him and the illustrator abec-san that I hope to get along well with them next year. Also, I'll wish you, who read through the entire volume, a brilliant year 2011! And I also hope that I won't be late again!

A certain day in October 2010, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ One of many Japanese terms used to refer to an elder brother or elder male cousin or by younger kids to refer to any elder male as a form of respect. Please note that the Japanese language carries different ways of referring to the same relative, each carrying different levels of affection, respect, etc. Therefore this has been left as is.
2. ↑ A grid or pattern placed in the eyepiece of an optical instrument, used to establish scale or position.
3. ↑ Gunner: 'ジュウシ' (Jyuu-shi), Death Gun 'シジュウ' (Shi-jyuu)
4. ↑ Japanese Police hotline, like 911
5. ↑ Koukyo is a palace that has a moat around it
6. ↑ Around $28.31 US dollars
7. ↑ Around $6,400 US dollars

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Credits

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Illustrator : abec

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